

A battle-to-the-death between
the two crack Secret Agents
of East and West!

75c
PB323

AVAKOUM ZAHOV **VERSUS**

07

ANDREI GULYASHKI



07

had been given his assignment. He must kidnap a Soviet scientist who had just perfected the deadliest laser yet devised . . .

A thrilling adventure of intrigue and fast-paced action unfolds as Avakoum Zahov pursues the wily western spy through Bulgaria to Paris, then Tangier and finally confronts him in the ice-locked vastness of the Antarctic . . .

"Zahov was slipping over the edge of the bottomless crevasse. 07 towered above him. Zahov tried to hold on, but he couldn't. His feet dangled into emptiness. 07 aimed a kick at his face."

AVAKOUM ZAHOV—BULGARIA'S TOP AGENT, MATCHES WITS WITH HIS WESTERN COUNTERPART—THE INFAMOUS 07.

Andrei Gulyashki

**Avakoum Zahov
Versus 07**

SCRIPTS PTY LTD

LONDON ■ MELBOURNE ■ SYDNEY

COPYRIGHT © ANDREI GULYASHKI

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED 1967
BY SCRIPTS PTY. LTD.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED BY NEW CENTURY PRESS PTY. LTD.
3-5 NORTH YORK STREET, SYDNEY.

SCRIPTS PTY. LTD.
40 MILLER STREET, NORTH SYDNEY.
406 LONSDALE STREET, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA.

230100-57
12/7/07

Part I

LONDON, July, 196—

THAT DAY NINE months ago when 07 had just returned from the Philippines, the Chief of Department A. had asked him to lunch at his St. James' Street club. After lunch, during which nothing of importance was said, they went up to the second floor and into one of the smaller rooms which was half-lit by a small fire burning in the grate. Opposite the fireplace they sat in a pair of deep velvet arm-chairs that dated from the time of Charles the Seventh. The waiter brought in some port and coffee and disappeared. It was November, a strong gale was blowing in from the Thames and the rain came down hard and unrelenting.

They sat opposite the fireplace for some time without speaking. Then the Chief placed the coffee cup on the small table next to him.

"I take it you speak Russian?" he asked.

07 answered sourly: "Not very well, Sir, I'm afraid."

A ghost of a smile appeared on the Chief's lips.

"But well enough to make yourself understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

The Chief stared at the glowing embers in the grate.

"Not good enough," he began. "Within seven to eight months I would like you to speak Russian as fluently as if you were a native of that country. Of course, I shall help you as much as I can. Beginning tomorrow I have arranged for you to have an instruc-

tor who speaks Russian as well as you and I speak English."

"You're sending me to Russia?" 07 asked with no evident enthusiasm.

"Of course not!" the Chief smiled again.

07 knew this smile only too well. It meant that he was to ask no more questions and that the interview was at an end.

"Is that all for now?" 07 asked.

The Chief nodded absently, slowly extending his hand.

At the beginning of June the Chief called him into his office.

"I am told that you already speak Russian like a true-born Muscovite," he said. "I must say I was very happy to hear it."

Before 07 could reply, the Chief went on: "As from today, you are on leave. On official paid leave. You can do whatever you please with your time, the choice is all yours and it is entirely up to you how you might wish to spend your time. That's how it will work in theory, but I'm afraid a gentleman will be calling on you tomorrow . . ." He looked over at him, shaking his head a little sadly. "I am afraid . . ." he repeated, "a gentleman will be calling on you who will upset all your plans."

07 waited. The old man was often in the habit of talking in circles. It was almost as if he actually *enjoyed* mystifying people. Either that, or he had become totally entangled, after so many years, in the devious coils of his profession.

"I have just heard about it," the Chief went on.

"He has arrived from Belgium. An old acquaintance of yours."

"Really?"

"Yes. We think he might have a proposition for you. If he has, then I must ask you to remember two things. First: whatever proposition this person makes to you will not come from this agency, but from NATO Headquarters. Second: it's entirely up to you whether to accept or reject his proposition. I do not know what this proposition may be, nor am I interested in knowing about it. But if you accept, remember you will not be acting on behalf of this office. We will not enquire into your whereabouts or your doings. In fact, we will accept no responsibility whatsoever for your actions."

"I understand," 07 said. He frowned thoughtfully at the desk-top. "Any tie-up with the Russian lessons?"

But the Chief just smiled his enigmatic smile and swung his chair round to face the window.

Another interview was over.

The man who called on 07 at his Chelsea flat turned out to be an old acquaintance called Richard, who was with the Second Department of NATO's General Headquarters. He was a tall, blue-eyed, red-faced American with a hearty laugh and a deep, whisky-roughened voice. 07 put his age at being somewhere in the fifties.

As he made himself comfortable on the sofa, putting his feet upon the small table next to a porcelain vase full of fresh tulips and lit a cigar, Richard came straight to the point:

"I came here to talk to you about Trofimov's discovery." He stopped and surveyed 07 through

narrowed eyes. The cigar smoke wreathed languorously about his head. "You've heard of it, of course? The latest Russian find?"

"No, I haven't."

"Oh dear." Richard's face was a stony mask. "Then I suppose I had better put you in the picture."

"It would be a help."

Richard said: "A military discovery. Unique and deadly."

"Some new kind of H-bomb?"

"I wish it were as simple as that. No, in comparison to this new weapon, the H-bomb will be about as effective as one of those slings in the Bible they used to put bumps on the heads of the chosen of Israel! No, this is a highly developed laser beam which can disable electro-magnetic waves. Have you any idea what this means?"

"You mean to say the Russians *have* such a weapon?" 07 lit a cigarette and stared at Richard's leather soles without really seeing them. "Have they got such a weapon?" he repeated.

Richard shrugged his broad shoulders. "God knows. Perhaps not now, but they damned soon will, the devils, if they can get away with testing it in secret or if we let them hang on to it, which comes to the same thing!" He slapped his knees as if swatting a giant mosquito.

"Right now it depends on us."

07 fetched two crystal glasses and a bottle of Scotch out of the cabinet. He put the glasses on the small table, next to the tulips and the leather soles, and filled them. He handed a glass to his visitor and reached for his. He downed the fiery liquid in one

gulp, gave a light sigh and walked over to the window. It was drizzling outside.

Richard puffed at his cigar in silence.

Normally, a small glass of whisky had no effect on 07. However, the veins at his temples stood out as the blood coursed rapidly through his veins. His head began to reel. What kind of mission had they decided to entrust him with?

Through the persistent drizzle the lights blinked softly as they did every night on the Kings Road. They seemed to be beckoning him.

"Can you imagine what'll happen," Richard said, "if the secret of this discovery stays in their hands for any length of time?"

07 tried to imagine. The prospect was too frightening. He didn't want to think about it, but, nevertheless, it had to be faced.

It had grown dark and he turned on the lights.

"We've got a plan," Richard said. "You're the first of several men we've thought of. We've worked together before, so I put your name forward. However, if you decide to back out, we'll not insist."

07 refilled his own glass. "I'm listening," he said.

They had another round of drinks and agreed to meet on July fifth, at ten p.m., on a pier near Tower Bridge. It was after nine when Richard left.

On the evening of July fifth, 07 had two cups of coffee at the Cafe Royal. He emerged into the street and hailed a taxi.

"The Hilton Hotel," he called to the cab-man as he leaned back in the seat. "And use the by-pass will you?"

They sped along the by-pass. 07 smoked in silence carefully observing the cars behind them. After the

by-pass at Knightsbridge they turned right and near Bowater House they came out into a quiet street within Hyde Park.

The rain came down in torrents.

"Now cut across Park Lane!" 07 commanded.

He loved Park Lane, the green spaces, the mansions, solemn and sedate in their Victorian stiffness.

Near the Dorchester they turned right again and as they were passing the bulk of the Hilton Hotel, 07 instructed the driver: "Now drive to Tower Bridge!"

If the driver was surprised, he didn't show it. The taxi came to a stop some hundred yards from the pier. 07 tipped the driver and waited until the cab had disappeared into the driving sheets of rain.

Richard was waiting for him below, at the water's edge. He took him into the cabin of a small motor launch which bumped lightly against the stone wall of the pier. A blue lamp suspended from the cabin's ceiling only partially dispersed the darkness.

"Are you clean?" Richard asked him.

07 carelessly waved his hand. He was unarmed.

The small vessel pulled noiselessly away from the pier. When they reached the middle of the river where it was darkest, Richard said:

"A ship will pick us up in the estuary and take us across to Le Havre. You will travel on a Canadian passport and your name will be Samuel Bonasis, salesman from Vancouver. A reservation has been made for you at the Hotel Calais in Paris. You will remain there one day. Levi—you remember Levi, don't you?—Levi will meet you at the Hotel and instruct you in the first phase of the operation." He patted him on the shoulder. "I guess that should be enough for now."

"I guess so," 07 agreed. As always at the beginning of an operation, he was reminded of a child's game.

But not for long.

Never for long.

ISTANBUL, July 8, 196—

07 arrived in Istanbul as Mr. Samuel Bonasis, travelling salesman from Vancouver, Canada.

The city hadn't changed. It would never change. It was timeless. After he had booked into his hotel, 07 went for a stroll through the crooked lanes and alleys of the old bazaar. He enjoyed doing this, just strolling, drinking sherbet and eating bakhlava in the shade of big brightly-coloured awnings. Finally, when the shouting of vendors and barefoot sherbet men was beginning to tire him out and he felt satiated with all the sights, and jostling smells and sounds, he suddenly spied something which took his fancy—a small dagger fashioned from *Damascus* steel about eight centimetres long, two-edged, its handle made of dark silver with two green stones on each side. If thrown at a target from afar, he knew it would surely pierce it because it had been excellently and cleverly centred. Istanbul hid many things of value in its dark, twisting streets, but one needed intuition, feeling and a discerning eye to spot them. The small dagger cost a good deal of money but it was pretty and might come in handy. 07 never stinted himself over such things. In any case, he could always wangle the expense chits somehow. He bought the dagger and putting it in his pocket he held it in his hand for a while. The old silver seemed to touch his heart through his hand. It was a beautiful instrument.

He headed back towards the hotel.

The city was bathed in a raspberry twilight which enveloped the slumbering waters of the Bosphorus and throwing the minarets of the St. Sophia mosque into sharp silhouette.

At 'eight o.o. sharp, Eastern European time' there was a short incisive knock at the door of his hotel room. Oscar Levi had told him in Paris to look at his watch: the hour 'eight o.o. Eastern European time' would be the first part of the password.

"Come in!" 07 called.

A man entered the room. He was as tall as a pole, gaunt and middle-aged. He was dressed in a white Panama suit and was wearing dark glasses.

"Good evening," he said, fixing the glint of his glasses on the Englishman. "I've been told, sir, that you have lumber to offer, two dollars to the cubic metre?"

"Two dollars twenty cents," 07 corrected him, and thought: 'Another Yank.' "Sit down."

"My name is Arthur," the stranger said. He took out a pack of Kent and offered them. 07 shook his head.

When the password formalities were completed, Arthur produced a brand new passport. He tapped the cover with his bony index finger.

"Beginning tomorrow, as soon as you set foot on Bulgarian territory, your name will be Rene Lefevre—a Swiss citizen and correspondent of the *Lebanese Telegraph Newsagency in Geneva*. We've laid on a car for you, an Opel, and the car documents as well as your driver's licence are here inside the passport." He fished a long booklet with blue covers from the

inner pocket of his jacket, examined it and laid it on top of the passport.

"Your bank account is with Credit Lyonnais, you can draw sums for Credit Lyonnais at any bank in the world. However, you have experience enough to know that a newspaperman on the payroll of the Lebanese shouldn't run up a big expense account."

07 smiled coldly.

Arthur was quiet for some time then, after stubbing out his cigarette, he went on: "I've been instructed to acquaint you with the second stage of Operation 'Light'. It goes into effect tomorrow morning and it outlines the assignment you'll have to carry out in Bulgaria, or more precisely, in the town of Varna. On July 19th, probably at noon, Bulgarian time, you'll be handed a coded message by the person Levi mentioned to you in Paris. You'll figure out some of the things in the coded message with the aid of the figures you see here. I guess you've used the same method before." He raised his left hand and took a gold ring off his finger. The ring seemed quite an ordinary one.

"It's a bit too large for me, but it will fit your finger perfectly."

07 slipped the ring on his finger. It was too large for him, but he said nothing.

"You can read the figures with the aid of a strong magnifying glass," Arthur said. "You'll decipher the rest of the message with the key Levi gave you."

07 nodded. "Everything's clear."

"Good." Arthur continued, "These figures are the key for decoding the *non-symbolic* part of the message. The non-symbolic part will tell you all you have to know so *we don't miss each other* on July

twentieth. This has been arranged according to the system used during the Atlantic operation. Can you recall it?"

"It's simple enough!" 07 said.

They were silent for some time.

"So . . ." Arthur spread his hands, which looked like dry sticks around which the white cuffs loosely hung, "so, in Bulgaria you'll have your usual aids: this ring and an ampermeter to detect electromagnetic waves and which has been attached to the dynamo of your car. There's nothing there that's likely to arouse suspicion of the Bulgarian State Security police.

07 had a question. "Do I get a gun?"

"You'll be supplied with a weapon by the person who'll deliver the coded message to you," Arthur replied. "Not a day, not a minute earlier or later than that. A gun with a silencer and a spare magazine. Is that satisfactory?"

07 looked up.

"But we don't want any shooting unless it's absolutely imperative," Arthur said in a low voice.

07 grinned. "Sometimes these things can't be helped."

Arthur rose. "Just be discreet. Well, a pleasant journey to you, 07. On July 21st, I hope I'll have the pleasure of having a drink with you. Incidentally, your car will be waiting for you tomorrow evening at six in front of the St. Sophia mosque." He made a slight bow. "Good luck." Then he was gone.

A violet darkness hovered outside the windows.

ISTANBUL-SOFIA, July 8-10, 196—

07 was driving the beige Opel-Rekord. The car

sped at ninety kilometres an hour along the sun-baked highway. The black asphalt river flowed furiously against him, the poplars on both sides of the road turned into rows of motionless guards of honour.

A hundred kilometres.

The wind whipped round the car. But 07 was at his ease and even smiled. His gloved hand was firm on the steering wheel as he drove with the precision of a flawless automaton. His left wrist rested on his knee and he lifted it only occasionally when taking a sharp turn in the road.

He smiled like a player holding a trump card. A green beetle swam in the side-view mirror. It looked like a green beetle from this distance, but it was a car on the highway behind him. 07's smile broadened. Damned silly! Did they really think him so naive that he would not guess? One of their cars, no doubt! So what! He had no illusions that these people would not see through the trick with good old Lefevre. He found it more exciting to play the game with the cards on the table. Come on! That was fairer and the best man would win! He reduced his speed to ninety. The green beetle drew nearer, growing bigger and bigger. A green tortoise now in the transparent depth of the side-view mirror.

The highway rose. A sharp curve to the right jumped into sight a hundred yards ahead. The two gloved hands gripped the wheel, the car swerving into the grass strip that divided the road. More for support than for anything else, his feet stepped on the clutch pedal and the brakes at the same time.

There was an unnerving screech as the car slammed to a halt. 07's muscles, tensed like steel springs, re-

sisted the pressure, but for a fraction of a second his head came dangerously close to the windshield.

Then—silence. The car in pursuit, hot on his trail, shot out to the left—the road ahead of the curve was blocked. There was no highway to the left, just empty space and green branches that stuck up in the air. The ground fell abruptly away into a deep ditch. The second car, almost flying around the bend, zoomed off into the air the way skiers take a ski-jump. There was a sharp, tearing crash.

07 sighed, then lit a cigarette before re-starting the engine. He did not even look into the ditch as he passed. It had nothing to do with him any more. An accident had occurred—that was it, pure and simple. One thing now—that infallible sixth sense that had served him so well in the past—he was convinced he had been the quarry of the occupants of the green beetle car.

He was not in a hurry now and rarely glanced at the side-view mirror.

07 abandoned his car near the entrance of the Army Club in Plovdiv and hired another from the local Balkantourist agency.

He had to be incognito for one day. That day he was to meet his contact in Sofia and after that he could reappear as good old Lefevre. Why not? Rene Lefevre had done nothing, he had a regular passport and he was in Bulgaria as a bona-fide newspaperman. All aboveboard and legitimate.

He would later report the Opel as having been stolen.

He arrived in Sofia at noon. He parked the car near the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and vanished. He bought an ordinary jacket in a clothing store,

not wanting to attract attention in his smart suit. He spoke Russian with the salesgirl.

SOFIA, July 11, 196—

07 had disappeared.

General N., Head of Department B., issued an order for action.

The Bulgarian Counter-intelligence Centre was seething with activity. There was a large room with numerous instruments: projectors and reflectors, TV cameras, optical radio apparatuses, all kinds of antennae—fixed and movable—and screens all along the walls. The commanding dais stood in the middle of the room. It faced a wall covered with mechanical devices to measure degrees, with ampermeters, all sorts of handles to turn machines on and off, clock-work mechanisms and small nickel-plated movable discs. The wall was like the dashboard of the latest, most complex jet plane.

The room was shaped like a rotunda with frosted neon tubes throwing a soft steady light from the shiny plaster dome.

The Chief Operator, dressed in white overalls, stood at the dais. His thin face had prominent cheekbones, his movements were self-assured and he had the searching eyes of a surgeon.

His soft baritone rose in the room, as silent as the bottom of a lake.

“‘Titan’ calling! . . .”

At various points in the capital there were cars listening, waiting for his voice.

The Chief Operator broadcast the coded signal of the Centre.

“‘Titan’ calling! . . . ‘Titan’ calling!”

He issued the order in a firm, commanding voice, with no trace of alarm in it.

"All sectors into action! . . ."

A pause of a few seconds. Complete silence. Then suddenly the alarm was raised.

"'Dragon' is missing! . . . 'Dragon' is missing! . . ."

The Chief Operator gave his listeners some coded combinations.

"12-U-15-C! . . . 12-U-15-C! . . ."

He lifted his hand.

"I'm switching it on!"

The attack was on. The Chief Operator pressed a button on the board and at the same instant the glare of a spotlight flooded 07's photograph fastened to a steel tripod. He looked unconcerned and care-free. There wasn't a single wrinkle on his high forehead. An icy bluish smile lurked around the curve of his full and handsome lips.

The man in the overalls pressed another button and a TV camera moved towards 07's photograph. A short melodious clicking was heard. The camera was on.

Now the Operator announced:

"Going over to reception! . . ." The neon tubes flickered out. There was a moment of complete darkness, then, suddenly the screens sprang to life, and the outside world, a many-faced world with a blue sky overhead, invaded the huge room. The outskirts of Sofia, the outlying residential districts, the stop of tram Number Twelve . . . The district of Nadezhda, the bridge, Lozenets . . . the tram stop in front of the Palace of Pioneers . . . the Railroad Station, the square in front of it . . .

Facing the screens, the Chief Operator's assistant

watched the cars racing up and down, the passengers getting on buses, the pedestrians, men and women crowding about bus stops.

An order from the commanding dais:

"Move ahead towards the City Centre! . . . Keep east! . . ."

A cinepanorama, only divided into many screens. Different sections of the square in front of the Central Department Store flashed on the screens, as well as the milling crowd of foreigners in front of the Balkan Hotel . . . Boulevard Rousky, festive-looking and proud as always . . . The monument to the King and Liberator. . . .

"Further east!"

The huge monument to the Soviet Army with the open space spreading out in front of it . . . The 'Ariana' Lake in the Park of Liberty . . . A rowboat with two oars hanging limp over the sides . . . A young girl with bare knees and a young man bending over her face, her eyes squinting funnily.

"The walks in the Park! . . . Move further in! . . ."

Occasional passers-by, leisurely walking. A young mother in a polka-dot dress pushing a stroller. The baby waving its pink little hands . . . Benches, most of them empty.

Suddenly a sound clicked. A tiny scarlet bulb started blinking anxiously on one of the screens.

The man in the white overalls ordered from the dais and now his voice was unusually excited:

"Narrow down the circle! . . . Narrow down the circle! . . . Bring it into focus! . . . Quick! . . ."

Leafy chestnut trees leaped into sight. The camera was gradually moving towards a bench. Right across

from it stood Yavarov's statue. On the bench . . .

"Hold it! . . ."

The picture on the screen was clear. It showed 07 and an unknown young woman in a sparkingly white dress. In his ill-fitting brown jacket, 07 had lost some of his former dash. Figures, the co-ordinates of the spot, flickered in the left-hand corner of the screen.

The Chief Operator's assistant kept his eyes fixed on the figures and pressing a button, spoke distinctly into a microphone:

" 'Whirlwind'! 'Whirlwind'! . . . 'Dragon' is in 1012-A-M . . ." Then he ordered: "Proceed with 'Caterpillar'! Proceed with 'Caterpillar'!"

During all that time the General had been nervously pacing up and down in his office, smoking incessantly, even though his doctor had forbidden him to smoke. He listened to the commands issued in the circular room over the intercom, following the battle waged by technology against 07's prowess. His face slowly relaxed. But he didn't smile.

The Same Day, in the Afternoon

Boulevard Rousky.

A convertible sports Skoda sped towards the Park of Liberty, along the yellow flagstones glittering like a golden river under the July sun. A blonde, her wavy hair bound by a yellow ribbon at the nape of her neck, sat at the wheel. At the crossing near the University a thin, moustached traffic policeman was just about to raise his arm to halt the speeding car. But at that instant he saw the licence plate and the number—a special letter and a multiciphered number! He blinked, then with his eyes followed the

sleek car as it raced out of sight. He ran a speculative finger along the line of his moustache. He had his orders, but, at times, they seemed a little strange.

The car came to a stop next to the first cab at the Eagles' Bridge taxi-stand. It was a two-minute walk, at a brisk pace, to the entrance of the park, to the Ariana Lake and Yavorov's statue.

The blonde quickly stepped out of the car. She was not tall, but her body was slender and lithe like a young girl's. She was wearing a cream-coloured silk dress, tight at the waist. The dress scarcely reached down to her knees which were angular like a sports-woman's.

The blonde walked briskly to the alley where Yavorov's statue stood. As she neared the bench where 07 and his acquaintance were sitting, she slowed down and casually stopped under a chestnut tree. She opened her purse and took out a black fountain-pen. It was like any other pen, but longer by two centimetres.

She pointed the pen towards the bench where 07 and his acquaintance sat. There was a slight click. Nothing seemed to happen, nothing apparent, but the miniature needle-like metal arrow shot out from the pen so fast that it was indiscernable to the naked eye. It traced an invisible parabola in the air and drove noiselessly into the ground, a yard away from the bench.

The woman in the cream-coloured dress replaced the pen so fast that it was indiscernible to the naked yards from where 07 was sitting. She looked as if she was waiting for somebody. She glanced at the statue

of the great Bulgarian poet and inwardly repeated his lines:

"Two lovely eyes . . ."

Then, placing the embroidered purse on her lap, she opened it and took out an expensive-looking compact inlaid with mother-of-pearl. She held up the compact mirror and freshened her lipstick.

As she did so, she listened to 07's voice speaking in French, coming softly through the powder compact.

"We'll meet every day, toward evening, in the bar of the Kaliakra Hotel. You will be a guide in the hotel, so no one will think it strange if we met there. Is that clear?"

"Yes!" The compact picked up the woman's voice.

"That's all!" 07 said.

They rose. 07 headed for the Park exit and the guide from the Kaliakra Hotel in Varna made towards the alley that led to the Institute of Agronomy.

SOFIA, July 13, 196—

The girl with the blue kerchief walked through the field of rye. The path wound across the fields leading towards a dirt road. The girl did not seem to be walking though, she floated upright as the wind swayed the ears of rye and the rye moved like a swishing sea of gold.

It was a beautiful sight and Avakoum Zahov smiled.

He had been missing the fields of sunflower and wheat. They were no longer as he had remembered them in his boyhood—little land-locked lakes. Now seas billowed everywhere—the wheat was dark gold, the sunflower bright gold and the maize was emerald melting away into the distance, stretching as far as the horizon and beyond.

His heartstrings pulled him to the gay earth, to the new white cottages and the fruit trees, and he had been promising himself one of these days to pay a flying visit to the old farmyard with the apple and cherry trees that was his. But there had been no time. When he was not working on a special assignment for the State Security, he was at the Academy. There they were now engaged in a project of turning the ancient Bulgarian capital of Turnovo into a museum-town.

But his heart drew him to that gold and he missed the old farmyard with the apple and cherry trees and the tiny flower beds of wild geranium and dahlias. That was why, just before he woke up, he would dream of the places where, bare-foot, he once had played—the meadows, the pathways between the fields and the soft dirt road flanked by crooked willows.

Now the girl with the blue kerchief walked in the rye field.

It was a dream Avakoum had often.

A whistle sounded once, then a second time. He opened his eyes. Fresh and alive with green leaves, the morning sun streamed into his room, filtering in through the branches of the cherry tree. Some of the boughs of the cherry tree hung over the veranda, shading the windows like green lace.

His blackbird, nesting under the eaves of the house, had woken him up. It demanded its breakfast shrilly and hungrily, whilstling like a man.

Avakoum rose and crumbled the roll he had bought at the bakery the evening before in his palm, spreading the crumbs on the window-sill beneath the cherry tree branches.

The day had begun well.

Then he took off his pyjamas and went into the bathroom. He stood under the shower and turned on the tap. Warm, then hot water ran, an almost scalding rain beating down on his broad shoulders. He hopped from foot to foot, bracing his shoulders, splashing water on his chest and squinting his eyes with the pleasurable sensation which pricked his body like an electric current.

Then a few exercises before the open door of the veranda. He began to dress, putting on a dark suit, because that day at about noon he was to go to the Academy. A few days earlier he had been elected to membership of the Council of the Archaeological Institute and for the occasion his colleagues were having a small ceremony in his honour in the assembly hall of the Institute, with fellow archaeologists and members of the Department of Byzantology attending.

He did not fancy noisy parties, toasts and cheers—amid the bustle of such functions he felt more lonely than Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. But he had to go, time and again, not to hurt his friends' feelings and also to please those who liked toasts and cheers.

So the day had begun well.

The girl with the blue kerchief, the ripe rye the colour of old gold, the whistle of the blackbird and the morning sun, alive with green leaves, were gay and pleasant even to a bachelor like him, who, at thirty-six had already grown rather sceptical; a hunter of spies; and of ancient monuments buried in the earth.

He had a high sense of order—he liked everything

to be in its right place, at the right time. One needed to be orderly to discover a Thracian tomb and uncover a foreign agent; a plan must start from A and B and proceed to Z. Of course, the old bachelor habits also fed the passion for orderliness.

There had been a girl once, Sia, but that had been a long time ago. So many things had happened and they had drifted apart. Still, sometimes, he could smell the lavender that was wafted in the air when they kissed.

The day proved to be an uneventful one. Avakoum absorbed himself in his work, and, by the time it was time to go home, he felt pleurably weary.

After dinner he turned on the tape recorder and, pulling his dressing gown close around him, he leaned back in the ancient red tasselled armchair and closed his eyes and listened to the music.

Outside a big frosted moon shone through the leafy crown of the cherry tree.

The first miraculous chords of the Adagio from the Moonlight Sonata soared high towards the wondrous universe.

The telephone rang. Avakoum cursed. An avalanche suddenly crashed into the room, flinging him back into the harsh world of reality.

He sighed and reached for the receiver. His arm felt as heavy as lead.

Even before the General spoke, Avakoum knew who it was.

No one else ever called at this hour.

Interlude

Professor Stanilov, Director of the Institute of Electronics, was having a birthday party that day—

he was forty-eight. For the occasion he had asked some of his closest associates to his villa for dinner.

At about two p.m. everything was ready and Metodi Stanilov, a little tired but highly pleased with himself, raced his shark-like Citroen back to town. He had scarcely entered his office when he learned that the Chairman had called him on the phone in connection with some very urgent business and when learning Stanilov was not available, had ordered him to be found.

Stanilov walked nervously into the Chairman's office.

The Chairman came straight to the point.

"Ah, Stanilov. I wanted to see you about Troffimov."

"Troffimov? You mean the Russian . . . ?"

The Chairman nodded.

Suddenly Stanilov felt weak. He knew Troffimov of course, but only by reputation.

He fumbled in his pocket for cigarettes, then he got the pack out and lit up. The match shook between his big stumpy fingers. He let himself down into the armchair opposite the Chairman's desk, hungrily inhaling the cigarette smoke.

Solemnly the Chairman announced, smiling slightly, that Konstantin Troffimov might be flying out of Moscow at any moment. But nobody or almost nobody knew *exactly* when he would go. Perhaps only two or three persons in the Soviet Union knew the exact day and time. It must be so, there was nothing strange about it as didn't Professor Troffimov now rate Number One in the world constellation of nuclear physicists? Strictly hush-hush. The main object of his visit was that he would attend the Inter-

national Symposium on Quantum Electronics which was to open at Varna in one week's time. He would arrive any time between now and then.

Stanilov listened to the Chairman in silence, drawing on his cigarette. Lost in thought, he was unaware that the dying cigarette was burning his fingers.

The Chairman said that it had been decided to have Trofimov housed in the Small Villa of the Academy. It was on two floors and had a splendid view of the sea. The villa was located in a lovely garden surrounded by high walls. He went on to say that the lower floor of the villa should be taken by Stanilov, while the upper floor would be placed at the Professor's disposal. There was a veranda floor, it had a better view of the sea and plenty of space. It had been decided that Stanilov, Director of the Bulgarian Institute of Electronics and delegate to the Symposium, should keep the important visitor company, be at his service and make him feel perfectly at home.

"Oh, of course," Stanilov shrugged his shoulders.

The Chairman also said that Stanilov would not have to bother about the professor's security—other people would be taking care of this and Stanilov was to have no worries on this score.

In the end, the Chairman said that Stanilov had to be in Varna that very same night, put up at the villa and keep in constant touch with the Chairman of the City People's Council. Quite by chance he remembered that their mutual acquaintance Avakoum Zahov, a member of the Institute of Archaeology and Historical Research, affiliated with the Academy, would probably be in Varna at the same time. Stanilov should not overlook him as a member

of the academic family, seek out his assistance if necessary, and introduce him to the professor.

"Hm . . ." Stanilov said doubtfully. "I'll keep the man in mind . . ."

"I'll see to it that he contacts you first," the Chairman promised.

Stanilov got up and assured the Chairman that he would leave for Varna in an hour or two at the latest.

"Oh, by the way," the Chairman called after him as he made for the door.

Stanilov stopped and turned. "Sir?"

"Happy birthday."

After Midnight

Each time he saw Avakoum, General N. was bitterly reminded of the fact he didn't have a son. Now, as he grew older, he realised that that was one thing he really wanted, and Avakoum would be the closest he would ever get to having one. But, like Avakoum, he knew that in this office, an outpost of a front-line where life and death constantly glared at each other, there was not and there could not be any room for sentiment.

They worked well together—with perfect precision, Avakoum sometimes thought. There was a lot to remember, from his very first assignment, the Icherenski case. That had been a long time ago—ten years ago. Since then, there had been such *causes celebre* as the affair of the foot-and-mouth disease, the case of the documentary film director's infra-red spectacles, and then, more recently, 'The Sleeping Beauty' in the ballet caper.

Those were complicated and hazardous clashes

over the past ten years with strong men who knew how to think and act and kill if necessary.

Ten years before, Avakoum had no wrinkles round his mouth and the hair at his temples was not grey. Ten years before he had been a young scientist going on archaeological expeditions and restoring amphorae, ancient vases, marbles and little terracotta statues from the age of Pericles in his studio. But that was before Department B., recognising an extraordinarily astute and analytical mind, had snapped him up.

Now, ten years later, he knew something the others did not even suspect: the General, this man of iron, this ruthless hunter, had a heart open to all the suffering of the world. The wrinkles round the mouth, the grey hair at the temples, the slightly sceptical smile on the lips were the indelible imprint of these encounters.

Avakoum entered the spacious office and stopped near the General's desk. He gave a brief salute.

The General nodded, put aside the file he had been studying, and rose unhurriedly, holding out his hand.

"Sit down, Avakoum!" He motioned him to the big leather armchair near the desk.

Avakoum lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply and glanced at the electric clock over the door—it was a few minutes before one a.m.

The General came straight to the point.

As Avakoum surely must know—the International Symposium of European physicists was due to open in Varna within a week. But what Avakoum did not know was that the celebrated Soviet professor Konstantin Trofimov was to attend and address the

Symposium. He was to arrive in Varna the following day.

Of course, Avakoum was familiar with the man's name. For one thing, if for nothing else, there was the business of his latest discovery that had been picked up by the Western press agencies and flashed to all parts of the globe. It had been a sensation all right. Konstantin Troffimov had discovered a laser ray which could not be refracted by any mirror surface and which could penetrate all matter and totally paralyse all kinds of electro-magnetic waves, thereby anticipating Western specialists in the field who had been writing, speaking and speculating about this very question. It was rumoured that in the very near future the professor was to test his discovery somewhere in the wide open spaces of the Soviet North.

NATO was in a flap. The conclusions were irrefutable. If the tests were a success it meant that the Eastern bloc possessed a weapon through which no tanks, no ground, underwater or air weapons, no planes or missiles, could possibly break through. The laser ray was irrefractible and it was said it could operate over a wide area.

So, the General went on, every precaution must be taken to ensure the great scientist's safety.

Avakoum asked if there had been any evidence of foreign intelligence activity.

To this question, for the time being, the General was in no position to supply a clear-cut answer. However, there was one thing. It could be a false alarm, but, all the same, it couldn't be overlooked.

A Swiss newspaperman, Rene Lefevre, had been staying in Varna for the past few days. Ostensibly,

he had come to report on the proceedings of the symposium.

The General did not wish to go into details and simply confined himself to the bare facts: this man, travelling on Rene Lefevre's passport, was, in fact, 07, an agent of British Intelligence. Department B. had had him under surveillance for some time. In fact, he had been lured, unsuspecting, into the country. His visa had been facilitated.

"You see, Avakoum, 07 is no ordinary bird to be let out of sight even while playing bridge in his St. James' Street club."

But the question was: what was he doing in Bulgaria? Who were his contacts? It wasn't the first time he had been in the country. He had played a not insignificant part in the Boyan Icherenski fiasco.

Avakoum had tangled with 07 before. Oh yes.

The General was not surprised to see Avakoum frown. The agent had reasons to protest as he had not been assigned to the surveillance of that man. Didn't he and the Englishman have old accounts to settle?

"Well," Avakoum shrugged his shoulders, "as the song says: 'If the count wishes to dance I'll only be too happy to play for him!'" He smiled.

The General regarded Avakoum in silence. Then he told him briefly about 07's arrival in Bulgaria, about the tragic accident with the surveillance car—one killed and two gravely injured. After slipping away, 07 "lost" his car in Plovdiv, arriving in Sofia in another he had hired from the Balkantourist agency. But in the afternoon he was spotted with a woman who had been identified as the guide Vera

Belcheva from the Kaliakra Hotel in Varna. The conversation between the two had been tapped.

General N. went on: "So it seems that, confident that we weren't on to him, he rented a room in the Rila Hotel and asked our authorities to recover his car, which had been stolen in Plovdiv. We found the car abandoned in front of the Army Club and returned it to him 'duly processed'. He then made the 'grand' gesture of donating fifty dollars to the militiamen who had recovered his 'stolen' car. I tell you, the man's a showman."

At this point in the General's narrative, Avakoum got up and paced up and down in the room.

"07 is now in Varna . . ." General N. wound up. "Whether his presence there has anything to do with Prof. Konstantin Troffimov's imminent arrival is a thing we'll soon find out. My guess is that it is. Anyway, we've assigned Colonel Vassilev to watch 07's movements."

Then the General said that Konstantin Troffimov was to be housed in the Small Villa of the Academy and that Professor Metodi Stanilov, Director of the Institute of Electronics, had been asked to act as the great scientist's host.

The General rose:

"A special plane will pick you up at the airport in two hours. You will be responsible for Troffimov's safety. Keep in touch with Colonel Vassilev, but don't get too taken up with 07!"

He came out from behind the desk and stood awhile with his hand on Avakoum's shoulder.

"I'm sure you realise what kind of man it is the Soviet people are putting in your trust."

Avakoum nodded.

The General released Avakoum's shoulder. Avakoum straightened.

"Thank you for your confidence," he said briskly, extending his hand.

"Good luck, Avakoum."

The milky dawn would have floated down the steep ridges of Mount Vitosha by now if it hadn't been for the overcast sky and the drizzle. It was always like this: day broke in the mountain as night fled from the valley. Wakened by the sun's slanting rosy rays, the day opened its eyes on the scented meadows of wild geranium. The mountain hailed the sun first. Tucking in her skirts in the gloomy nooks and crannies of the Isker Gorge, the night hied to the Dark Hollow, swarms of bats waiting for her in its labyrinths.

Now the rain came down and bristling, loaded clouds shrouded the Black Peak and the meadows. Nestled in shelter, the day drowsed on because slumber was sound and sweet when mists crept about in the quiet drizzle outside.

Avakoum switched on the lights and squared his shoulders. His eyes went to the tape recorder. He needed music.

His valise was packed, the necessary working tools were stacked inside.

Always he needed music. Particularly at the beginning of an assignment when he needed it to soothe his jangling anticipation.

It was five a.m.

Part 2

VARNA, July 14, 196—

"THE COLONEL IS expecting you at the eastern exit!"

Avakoum immediately recognised the young man who had approached him—a lieutenant from Section A serving in Vassilev's group.

"Good . . ." Avakoum nodded. Because of his sleepless night he *felt* the dampness in the air and turned up the collar of his trench coat. But the early morning chill nevertheless crept up his shoulders.

Day had broken. The lights around the hangars were growing pale in the milky dawn. The pilot of the military plane that had flown him in was chatting with the airfield's traffic controller.

Avakoum lifted his heavy valise from the ground and followed the lieutenant. Vassilev was waiting for him in his Volga sedan at the eastern exit of the airport. Short of stature, his eyes green and cold, his moustache neatly trimmed and his face so clean-shaven that the skin looked bluish, Vassilev held out his hand in silence, helped Avakoum put his luggage on the luggage boot and ushered him to the front seat.

Vassilev drove the car himself—he trusted only his own hands. Pedantic and mistrustful, he was a difficult man to work with, but there was no denying the fact he was good at his job. He was on familiar terms with no one.

Avakoum yawned. The tyres rolled sleepily along

the asphalt. "Any news?" He wanted a cigarette but he knew Vassilev disapproved of tobacco.

The Colonel shrugged. "There's news of all kinds." "07?"

Vassilev looked at him askance, then he slowly put on the brakes—the highway swerved sharply to the left, in the direction of the town.

"You could easily get all such information yourself," the Colonel replied in a markedly flat and calm voice, "because for the present 07 isn't doing anything in particular. He has rented a room in the International House of Journalists, room number seven, first floor. He gets up at ten in the morning, then he has breakfast until eleven. He's on the beach from eleven to one—most of the time he's out swimming. Then he comes back, changes and goes to the restaurant where he normally has his meals with three newspapermen—two English and one French. From two to four p.m. he lounges on the terrace of the hotel reading newspapers or magazines. At approximately five p.m. he goes to the bar of the Kaliakra Hotel where he meets the guide, Vera Belcheva. The day before yesterday he took her out for a drive in his car to Galata. They spent two hours yesterday rowing close to the shoreline. After supper, 07 plays bridge with the two Englishmen and the Frenchman. He winds up his evening in the bar over some Scotch. That's about it. It seems our 07 is fairly much a gentlemen of habit."

Avakoum smiled. "An excellent summary."

As they drove by a two-storeyed villa at the back of the International House, in the direction of the town, the Colonel slowed down, shifting gears and

pointed out a white villa with a balcony and a sharp-pointed roof.

"This is my base," he explained. A hundred yards or so farther down, he nodded his head to the left: "That's the Small Villa of the Academy, behind the wall, can you see it? Troffimov will be staying there while the Symposium is on." He swung the car left again as soon as they had passed the Small Villa. He was driving along a street which looked more like an alley running parallel to the shore. A minute later he stepped down on the brakes. The car skidded.

"This is your place."

It was an ordinary-looking two-storeyed house as high as it was wide, with a veranda and a yard sloping down to the sea. The green shutters on the windows on the upper floor were down.

The car had scarcely come to a stop when a tall, handsome young man, dark-eyed and swarthy, came running out of the garden gate opposite them.

Avakoum got out of the car. "Well, if it isn't Captain Markov!"

They had worked together on the case of the foot-and-mouth disease and also on the Sleeping Beauty affair.

"Good to see you."

They entered the living room with the veranda. It was dark inside. Avakoum walked across to the window to open the green shutters, but Colonel Vasilev stopped him.

"One moment." He turned to Markov: "Would you excuse us for a moment, please!"

After the Captain had left the room, the Colonel switched on the lights. He gestured. "In that side-board over there, you'll find a radio transmitter on

ultra high frequencies." He tore a sheet from his notebook and handed it to Avakoum. "Here you are! These are the wave-lengths and the calling signals for you to get in touch with me and the Centre." Then Vassilev left.

Avakoum opened the shutters and both doors of the portal then stepped out onto the veranda. The wide expanse caught his eyes immediately. The sea smiled. Fishermen were mending their nets and singing songs of the sea.

Avakoum shaved, then changed into a light grey suit. He summoned Markov.

He filled his pipe, lit it and stood in silence for a while. Staring absently through the open window and into the grey shimmering distance, he finally asked:

"What's going on in the Small Villa?"

Captain Markov said that Professor Metodi Stanilov had arrived very late the night before and that he was staying on the first floor.

Avakoum took out the floor plan of the villa and spread it on the table.

"Right here," he pointed, "on the second floor, just opposite the hall landing, there's a room with windows overlooking the courtyard. The place was designed so this room would be a sort of parlour where people could be undisturbed. It was to be used for discreet purposes. Now, that's where we'll put the valet who'll be looking after Troffimov. He'll have a view of everything from there — the staircase, the entrance to the second floor, and the courtyard. You'll see to it that a telephone is installed in the room right away giving him a direct connection with this villa and with the District Centre." His finger

jabbed at the chart. "Here, as you can see, the left wall of the villa is a blank one. It is separated from the sea by a distance which, according to the scale of the floor plan, is hardly more than twenty feet. The coastline here is steep with a sheer drop to the sea's edge, while the back of the house, to the left, that is, from the sea, is joined with the high wall fencing in the yard to the north. If somebody took it into his head to enter the Small Villa from this side, from the coast here, he would have to use a rowboat. That would be dangerous because the waves are bound to hurl the boat against the rocks and smash it to pieces. Second—he would have to climb up the almost vertical rocks which, as the marking here shows, are no less than two metres high. Third—he'd risk being seen by our coastguards who will be watching the coast and the sea from a point on the beach opposite the villa. How far is this spot from the place where our motor boat is moored?"

"One kilometre at the most," Markov answered.

Avakoum smiled coldly. "So if a curious and uninvited visitor decides to sneak into the Small Villa, he'll have his work cut out for him. But let's assume that this man is very skilful and that luck is with him, as is often the case with reckless men. What then? The outcome still would not be favourable to him. Wouldn't justify the risks involved. Why? Because the wall of the villa overlooking the sea is windowless, as smooth as glass up to the roof, six metres high. True, right here, under the roof, there is a small, round window, like an embrasure, but it can be reached only by use of a ladder, or a rope which would have to be lowered to him from above. It's impossible to bring a ladder along up that rocky

incline and if anybody decided to climb up to the attic and lower the rope—he'd be spotted by our 'valet' . . . To avoid the bad easterly winds in the winter time, the architect had the villa face the sea only partially, leaving the eastern side without a single window except for the one in the attic. That's why, I think, this side of the villa is inaccessible, provided that the 'valet' keeps his eye open and lets no one into the attic."

He was silent for awhile, then he raised his finger: "It will be your duty, my friend, to remind the 'valet' that *nobody* is to go into the attic, not even Professor Stanilov!"

Markov looked at him in surprise—wasn't his teacher going a bit too far! Here he was casting a doubt on the man State Security had chosen to be Troffimov's host!

"Not even Professor Stanilov!" Avakoum repeated firmly, with a dark look. He had read the other's thoughts, his eyes going through the student like harpoons, piercing into his very thoughts.

"Yes, Comrade Major!" Markov almost moaned. His face had gone pale. "I understand. Perfectly."

"But be tactful about it," Avakoum cautioned in a low voice.

"Tactful!" Markov echoed. "Of course."

"Now, let's go further into this," Avakoum said in a softer tone, although his eyes remained cold. "So, my friend, having reached the Small Villa from the sea, this man would, in the last analysis, be forced to do what he would have done had he approached the place by *land*: he'd have to get to the door or windows on the first floor. This would bring him to the front of the villa. That being the case, the section

of the courtyard through which one could reach the entrance and the windows is precisely the section that must be under surveillance around the clock. Do the conditions exist for a twenty-four-hour surveillance? It seems to me they do." He pointed with his finger and poked at a notch on the floor plan.

"This is a brick building," Markov explained. "A room with a small anteroom to it. It used to be a porter's lodge or a gardener's cottage. Now it's packed full of old odds and ends."

"It's a good spot," Avakoum said. "Two persons could easily be accommodated in there. A villa of the Academy, no matter how small, needs a porter and a gardener . . ."

"There's no garden." Markov shrugged his shoulders.

"No matter," Avakoum said. "It's never too late to make up a modest-sized garden with a couple of flower beds. As the man entrusted by the Administration of the Academy with the maintenance of its property, isn't that your cover? Kindly see to it."

"Yes, Comrade Major."

They exchanged glances and laughed. Avakoum's look was warm once more.

He emptied his pipe, put it away in the sideboard along with the floor plan, and locked the drawer.

"The rest is elementary," he said, lighting a cigarette. "To keep watch over the streets around the walls, and put a tail on Troffimov's car. Of course, both cars must be in constant touch with the Centre and with this house. I'm sure you've provided all that . . ."

"Yes, Comrade Major!" Markov said, smiling a

little triumphantly. After all, he had already thought of these things.

Avakoum went on staring into the distance. A slender coil of smoke, barely visible, swam out of the horizon, to the right . . . A ship came into view.

"Did it rain here last night?"

Markov was startled. "No. They say it hasn't rained here for some time."

Avakoum shook his head. "That's interesting."

Markov said nothing.

"Well?" Avakoum turned toward him suddenly.

He was another man now, smiling and affable, a close friend, as he stretched out his hand. How many persons were lodged within him? Markov wondered. Each had his own pair of eyes and his own voice.

"Everything's clear!" Markov said.

"Excellent."

They had to act and act quickly. Professor Troffimov might arrive at any moment.

"Go!" Avakoum said. "I'll leave a few minutes after you."

The Same Day

Avakoum entered the courtyard of the Small Villa.

It was a white solid building designed in a late Baroque style, with tall windows and a redwood balcony on the second floor and with marble steps leading up to a broad vault-like entrance. A garage with a sliding door had been added to the left wing of the house beneath the second floor windows. There was a round area of concrete marked with gasoline stains in front of the garage. Avakoum peered inside—the heavy door had been pushed a few inches to

the side. The shark-like snout of a Citroen gave off a bluish gleam in the semi-darkness.

Then Avakoum circled the house—there were exactly twenty feet between the eastern side and the sea. It was a wild stretch of land covered with dry yellow grass and with patches of blue thistle.

He stood on the edge of the cliff. The water below beat against the rocks, churning up spray and foam. The white crests of the waves came and went like the curved silvery fins of giant fishes. Avakoum had no great experience of the sea, but he could not see how any boat could withstand the impact against these rocks.

Lost in watching the booming and churning water below, he suddenly sensed with his whole body that someone was standing behind him, watching him in silence. He took a step back and swiftly feeling for his gun under his jacket, he spun round. His eyes met those of Metodi Stanilov.

He stood some feet away, looking like a dark, looming cloud. He wore a brown shirt, unbuttoned all the way down, with the sleeves rolled up above his elbows, and had on a pair of corduroy pants—so wide that they made him look like the trunk of an ancient elm from the waist down.

"Hm . . ." he muttered. "So it was you!" He was quiet for some time, frowning, his eyebrows bristling like hail clouds with only the lightning missing between them. "So it was you!" he repeated and shook his huge head menacingly. "You came in like a robber prowling around the place! I could have killed you just like that, do you know? A good kick and good-bye!"

"That's right!" Avakoum said in a calm, distinct voice. "You *could* have killed me."

He smiled, letting his hand drop to his side.

"I'm sorry," Stanilov said in a softer and apologetic tone. "The tension you know. Jittery. The whole business has made me jittery."

The professor took Avakoum up to the villa. They went in through the stately entrance and into a huge room with a coloured marble floor. To the left a door led to Stanilov's apartment, while to the right a white marble staircase ascended to the second floor. Across from the entrance was a door, smaller in size and somewhat unusually narrow, with a bronze door-knob.

"This leads into the garage," Stanilov explained.

They went through the villa from attic to cellar. Finally they entered the garage. Stanilov's Citroen rested on a few thick deal planks. The opening of some sort of shaft showed dark underneath.

"What's that down there?"

"A pit," Stanilov replied. "Probably for washing the chassis and lubricating the car. It has a drainage canal."

After they had had a look at everything, Avakoum said he was in a hurry to leave for Preslav.

"Aren't you going to stay for the Symposium?" Stanilov was surprised.

"I might come back . . ." Avakoum answered evasively.

At about ten-thirty Avakoum returned to the villa in which he was staying and cheerfully saluted the sergeant standing guard in the small vestibule at the foot of the staircase to the second floor. He entered

his room, took out his kit and stood in front of the mirror.

Half an hour later the sergeant heard his footfalls on the stone steps. According to regulations, he rose from his chair but was stunned to see another man, a total stranger. He was momentarily disconcerted.

The man who faced him was tall and his shoulders stooped. For this reason his arms looked longer, as the arms of porters on the wharves do when they are getting past the prime of life. The man wore a threadbare dungaree suit and a faded necktie. He had on a pair of cheap celluloid sunglasses of a transparent greenish colour.

He was already pulling the gun from his holster when the stranger said in a very quiet reproachful tone: "You're a poor observer!" Avakoum pointed to his feet. "Didn't you notice I had on the same pair of shoes?"

He was out on the beach at noon. He had on a pair of black pants rolled up to his knees and a sailor's shirt of blue and white stripes. He wore a new wide-brimmed straw hat.

He went the length of the beach once, then twice. He was in no hurry, the golden sand caressed his feet, burying them up to his ankles. The sun was warm and the waves flashed their white crests in the distance while the air gave off a salt-laced scent of the blue expanse, of boundless and humid space.

He dipped into the sea several times, keeping close to the shore, alongside the beach. Then he swam far out, way beyond the last red buoy. When he had had enough of this and was just at the point of returning to the beach, he spied a tiny dark spot among the waves, to the right. It was a man's head. Then Ava-

koum saw a man's arms as they threshed up and down, cleaving the water like a propeller, now in and now out of sight.

An electric current shot through his body as if he had touched one of those electrically-charged fishes he had read about. At last, at last! He tensed his muscles to swim forward and the splashing water sounded like solemn music round his ears.

He came out of the water and determined the other's position and his direction, then he sprawled out on the sand, resting on his stomach and propping himself up on his elbows. His eyes were a camera which registered everything, letting nothing go unheeded.

07 stood at the water's edge, the sea licking his feet as he passed his hands languorously over his chest and thighs. He took off the rubber cap and shook the water out of his hair.

For a few seconds 07 stood motionless, but that did not seem to be a deliberate pose. He was on the alert, his glance enclosing an ellipse in space and Avakoum knew perfectly well that he noticed everything within the ellipse.

Then, apparently satisfied that everything was in order, 07 walked straight on, like a man with no further interest in his surroundings.

A connoisseur of the human anatomy, Avakoum could not but admire the muscular body which unobtrusively hinted at its strength and potentialities, yet with no menace to it. The man's gait was lazy and rhythmic, like the step of a jungle cat.

Avakoum turned his head away.

Countless strings of silver scintillated on the blue bosom of the sea.

Evening

That same evening, seated at the big table in the living room, Avakoum listened to Markov's story of Konstantin Troffimov's arrival that afternoon. He had flown in from Moscow on a special military aircraft. Then they talked about the Small Villa once more.

Markov said that the room on the second floor had already been set up with a small buffet, a sofa, and a hotplate on which the 'valet' could make tea and coffee for Troffimov and his visitors. Measures had been taken to stock the buffet adequately with orange juice, syrups, cognac and candy so that the stuff would not have to be brought in from the outside before an experienced look had been cast at it in advance. A direct telephone had also been installed. The "valet" knew his job. He was as strong as an ox and a superb shot as well. Two "gardeners" were housed in the lodge in the courtyard. They were to start working on the garden first thing in the morning. At night they were to relieve each other every four hours. Another phone had been installed in the lodge.

Avakoum asked: "What arrangements have been made to ensure the professor's safety about town?"

"The City People's Council have placed their newest Mercedes at his disposal day and night," Markov answered. "The District Centre has supplied the chauffeurs—two experienced drivers and very

reliable men. While the car is not in use, it will be parked at the Centre in the garage. The professor has been given the direct number of the garage—a ring will bring the Mercedes to the front of the Small Villa in five minutes. The District Centre has ordered two radio taxi cabs as you wished, to take shifts accompanying the Mercedes. In each taxi there will always be two men, who are first-class shots. That's all!" Markov finished and smiled.

A silence fell.

Outside the moon shone bright.

Avakoum was silent for a while, then he said:

"I have two suggestions to make: First, set up a round-the-clock watch inside the garage of the Small Villa with a sentry posted there. Second, have the two 'gardeners' stand guard in shifts before the second floor living room *at night*. What do you say?"

Markov rose. What could he say! He told Avakoum he would arrange for the shifts that very night.

As he was leaving, Avakoum asked:

"What would you have done if you hadn't been busy tonight and you had the evening off?"

Markov looked through the window and his glance followed the moon path shimmering along the sea and into the horizon.

"I'd have rowed a boat far into the sea!" He kept looking at the chain of the moon as he smiled softly.

"All right!" Avakoum said. "First, take care of the shifts in the Small Villa, and then take our motor boat and cruise up and down the coast!"

"Thank you!" Markov nodded happily.

"What was the secretary's name?" Avakoum asked. "Trofimov's secretary?"

"Natalia Nikolaevna," Markov's face went red. "Why do you ask?"

"I'd forgotten her name . . ." Avakoum smiled knowingly.

For some time after Markov had gone, Avakoum was in bed reading the third volume of Plutarch's "Lives". He was engrossed in the chapter on Brutus. Sleep fled from his eyes as it always did when he was in the grip of tension. Just the same, he had made up his mind to finish the chapter in order to relax—he always took one of the Plutarch volumes with him whenever he left Sofia for more than a day or two.

Letting the book drop to the cover from time to time, and staring into the darkness which swayed outside the open window, he thought of Brutus: "What a dreamer! What a romantic! The complete opposite of his friend, Cassius, the man of the iron fist and the rash adventurer . . ."

He was falling asleep when he suddenly thought of Stanilov. Maybe because Stanilov had fists like Cassius', a ruffian's fists . . . Strange, very strange! Once in Stanilov's villa, he met the correspondent of a Western newspaper whom the Centre had placed under surveillance and not without reason. That man had twice 'confused' the roads and had twice—accidentally, he claimed—found his way into the zone of radar pads. Stanilov had lived for ten years in Paris, maybe he knew *all kinds* of correspondents. But why had that particular one come to his villa?

It was only a small point, but one that had to be filed away all the same.

Brutus . . . The baton and banner of history had always been in the hands of dreamers . . . But that ruffian Cassius, his hands like two hammers!

VARNA, July 15, 196—

It was close to midnight. The lamp was still on but the book had fallen to the floor. In his sleep Avakoum heard a familiar voice:

"Comrade Major!"

"What's the matter, Markov?" he asked without opening his eyes. His eyelids were sticky with sleep.

"It's 07!" Markov whispered.

Why did his whisper? Was he afraid the name would startle Avakoum in his sleep?

Suddenly he sat up in bed, throwing the blankets away from his body. His elbows were on the pillow, his eyes were already open and the harpoons glinted in their depths.

"Where is he?"

"I saw him along the shore, near the Small Villa," Markov answered in a muffled voice. "I was just turning the motor boat to the left-hand side of the shore when I caught sight of him. The moon's up, it's as clear as daylight . . ."

Avakoum did not speak for some time. Then he bent over the side of the bed to pick up the book and laid it carefully on the night table.

"Have you notified Colonel Vassilev?"

Markov nodded. He had returned at full speed and was back here in two minutes flat. He had grabbed the phone and was immediately put through to the Colonel on the direct line, but . . .

"But what?" Avakoum looked at him carefully.

"The Colonel told me to mind my own business and not panic over trifles next time . . ." Markov looked very confused and crestfallen all at once.

"You sure it was 07?"

"I swear by my honour!" Markov snapped to attention. He added: "You know I have never made that sort of mistake."

"Of course not," Avakoum murmured thoughtfully. "You're a good man." He lay back on the pillow and pulled up the bedclothes again. "All right," he went on, "have a look around the Small Villa, check the sentries and see that everything's okay. After that, get off to bed. Now, please switch off the lights as you go out."

After Markov had gone, Avakoum took the radio transmitter out of the sideboard, called Vasilev's base and asked to speak with the Colonel.

"You've been informed that 07 has been seen around the Small Villa."

"Correct."

"What do you think?"

"Your man's been dreaming. 07 has been constantly under the surveillance of my men! He's never left the boat where he's with the guide, not even for a minute. They're in the boat right at this moment, fifty metres away from the coast, south-east from the House of Journalists."

"Please excuse my bothering you."

"Not at all!"

Avakoum locked up the radio transmitter, took out a bottle of cognac and swallowed a few drops. Then he slipped under the sheets again and closed his eyes.

VARNA, July 12-16, 196—

Sheer bliss this, stretching on the chaise-longue, his eyes closed against the sun's rays. 07 felt his body was singing. It was vibrant and bursting with harmony,

and it felt so good under the shower of the hot sun drops, under the caressing fingers of the breeze which had flown over dry steppes and scorched sands. Damp and tender with the breath of the sea, the breeze was like the loving hand of a young girl. He felt good and this state of goodness meant something very precise and definite to him: satiated desires, the excellent condition of his heart and muscles and an immediate future offering him a world of excitement. He had no bent for abstract thinking, but even if he had, he could have said with a clear conscience: "I'm fulfilling myself, life has given me this opportunity and I feel good!"

And could it have been otherwise? At breakfast he had had half a broiled chicken dressed with tomatoes and a green salad. Lunch had consisted of a healthy portion of roast lamb with a delicious sauce preceded by some excellent hors-d'oeuvre: lobster, dried sausage, spiced with plenty of black pepper, boiled snails and a golden fillet of fish with wine vinegar and olive oil.

Could he have been dissatisfied? There were imported wines of all sorts like Burgundy and Tuscany to be had. But on the advice of his French friend, he had once tasted the Melnik wine they had here, a good southern wine, red and rich. Once he had drunk a glass, he felt he could have gone right to hell and challenged the devil himself or whoever, if it were in the interests of the Service, the *sanctum sanctorum* of his life. This Melnik wine was so potent that he swore by it.

Two of the chambermaids, their full breasts like southern amber grapes, were already smiling at him invitingly. He hadn't made up his mind yet which

one of the two he would take up with first. With such lovely golden grapes hanging from the vine, it would be a sin not to stretch out his hand and pick them. The two chambermaids were like two thirsty does peeping through the thicket out to the water-hole. On the first floor, several doors away from his room, there lived a Dutchwoman working for an Amsterdam newspaper. Another doe with docile and moist eyes lying at the feet of the hunter, imploring him: "Please taste me, and you'll see how tender my meat is! You'll swear by your hunter's honour that you have never before had such a juicy steak!" Then, of course, there was Vera Belcheva, the dark-tanned guide from the Kaliakra Hotel, whose eyes were like the black Thracian night and whose lips were redder than the wine that made him giddy and put the whole world in a rosy mist . . .

Yes, life for 07 at this moment was full of possibilities.

But there were limits and he knew them all. Life was good as long as it was safe. In the interests of that safety he saw to it that he kept his weight down. His muscles mustn't go flabby and his mind must always be alert. Full of vitality and appreciative of the rosy aspects of life, he had a mortal fear of death. He shuddered at the thought of it. Dead men could not have Scotch or Melnik wine, they could not wear Saville Row suits nor could they have pretty girls. He must watch over his safety. Take it easy and not go blindly rushing into things.

For one thing, he had been under surveillance the moment he crossed the border. He had tricked them and shaken them off, but only for a day. They had picked him up again and he was back within their

camera range. His senses tingling, he was conscious of the eyes watching him, following him carefully. They had even bugged his car—his indicator had found it out. Let them go to the devil, he wasn't so naive as to use his car for serious work . . . But nonetheless . . .

No two ways about it—they had put Zahov, their "ace" on his trail, the man who'd had Icherenski put out of the way at the time. Poor Icherenski, he had known him personally. A man like that wasn't to be found in the profession every day. A gentleman of the old school.

He thought of Zahov. It was a pity he could never scent the Bulgar's tracks when he got to Sofia to "clear up" the case. The ace had vanished off the face of the earth. Now the cunning devil was watching him for sure, tightening a noose round his neck. Well, he'd wait and see!

It had to be Zahov. A case like this came up once in a hundred years. Rarer than a shooting comet.

So, once again, it was either Zahov or himself. A battle of wits, which was exactly to 07's taste.

Then, the anxiety, as maddening as a horse-fly, thrust its sting into him again and gave him no peace. It could not be lulled to sleep.

The anxiety had snowballed directly after Troffimov's arrival on the Soviet Military *Illyushin*. His mood was poisoned the minute he learned *where* the professor had been housed. The villa was virtually—no, damn it, it *was* inaccessible. They were damned clever, had taken every precaution. But then, it couldn't have been otherwise. Troffimov's mind held a weapon more terrible than a thousand H-bombs put together—the sun turned into one *single* ray!

To the north, west and south was a high wall and quiet streets, with men posted at intervals, watching the wall and every moving object passing along them. There were at least two dozen eyes watching in the open and in hiding, perhaps electronic equipment into the bargain. A sparrow settling on the wall would be spotted at once. What was worse, he was already under surveillance, day and night! How could he get over these walls?

Suppose he did manage to scale the wall unnoticed: What then? Then he'd have to accomplish two things: to find out the radio waves, the calling signals and the code Troffimov used to contact his own Moscow Centre and to take . . . Troffimov and his secretary out to sea, with their own consent, of course, so that they didn't make a noise or call for help!

Pretty tall order! His head swam. Yet, hadn't it been drummed into his head time and time again that there was no such word as impossible? So the business of entering the villa was an obstacle, but it was a surmountable one.

Slipping over the wall was out of the question, he'd have to cross that off as a possibility. That left only one alternative—the sea. But the sea was also guarded on both sides of the villa. The very day after the professor's arrival at the Small Villa, 07 had swum past that part of the shore. He had seen the two sunbathing and instinctively knew that they were keeping up a round-the-clock surveillance.

07 decided he would have to shoot one or both of the guards dead. Better the one standing on the right-hand side, because the location was more deserted and there were fewer villas in the area. Or he could tackle the Small Villa head on from the

sea, and somehow manage to climb the rocks that rose straight up out of the water, a natural stone wall honed down to blue glass by the sea.

In the first instance, if he shot the sentry on the right flank in the dark by drawing up to him, without being seen or heard, he'd still have to cope with the wall which reached down to the water's edge just like the one to the north. So there were *two* obstacles: the sentry and the wall. If he failed to kill the sentry outright, the man would give the alarm and the whole job would fall through from the start.

The sea gave him a chance, but those rocks . . . They were a formidable barrier.

And there was something else—something he had noticed that morning while swimming around the rocks. He wasn't absolutely sure it was what he thought it was. He would have to find out.

The important thing was not to arouse the suspicions of the sentries.

Interlude

Three years before in Russia, 07 had been in a devil of a scrape and had escaped only by the skin of his teeth. It was in the vicinity of Archangel, near the place where the Dvina River flowed into the sea. His superiors were interested in that area, so he had been dropped near there from a submarine. A motor boat had taken him to the mouth of the river.

At dawn 07 went to work with his camera and, carried away by the job, he covered quite a distance. The location was very picturesque, dappled with sunshine and shadows, deserted, an inviting place for a rest. Propped up on his elbow, he suddenly saw a

big black boat slowly drifting past in the shadows of the bank opposite. The boat stopped practically across from him. A man sitting in the boat threw a fishing line into the water. 07 levelled himself with the ground, the tall grass nearly hiding him. He looked through his binoculars: the man was in uniform. He was wearing a cap and a jacket was slung over his shoulders. There was a sub-machine gun across his knee. He was a handsome young fellow, snub-nosed, with a neatly trimmed moustache. 07 thought he was probably a lieutenant in the frontier division.

The lieutenant turned his back to him and began to fasten his fishing rod to a stick near the rudder. Then he folded his jacket and lay down in the boat. 07 couldn't see him now.

It could be a trap. The man had either gone to sleep or pretended to sleep, one or the other. "If it's the second," he thought, "he's probably watching me now through a crack in the side of the boat, waiting to get me in the sights of his sub-machine gun if I stand up." He remained prone in the grass, patiently awaiting the other's next move. Only a few minutes later he had the satisfaction of knowing that his *experience* had again not deceived him. The lieutenant got up again, resuming his former position, silent and motionless, with his eyes fixed on the bank opposite.

"Isn't he now watching me and my spot in a mirror hidden from my sight?" was the thought that flashed through 07's mind. He wasn't going to let himself be beaten in this game so easily. Patience!

But his patience nearly sent him hurtling down

into the bottomless pit. It was his instinct that saved him.

Suddenly sensing something, 07 turned round and looked over his shoulder. His throat went completely dry as a clammy horror had clenched his body in a vice. He couldn't have been more dismayed if a tiger had sprung into sight before him.

Some twenty paces away from him stood the snub-nosed lieutenant, the handsome young fellow with the moustache who at that very moment was *sitting* in his boat, waiting for the fish to bite. Yet there he was facing 07 right here, on this bank, near the forest. All this would have seemed utterly incredible, an hallucination, a trick of the nerves, had not the lieutenant shouted what must have been "Hands up!" as he pointed his sub-machine gun menacingly.

There was no time to think. 07 wriggled like a snake on which someone had carelessly trodden, rolling over the ground twice and plunging into the water. At that instant the bullets of the sub-machine gun sprayed the spot he'd just left.

He was saved by a bend in the river some thirty yards down stream. He swam back to the bank keeping under water nearly all the way. Then he leaped into the shrubbery and as if he was being pursued by tigers, he dashed off back towards the place where his boat was. Reaching it, he started the engine, and several minutes later was skimming the green crests of the sea waves. His camera with all the film in it had been abandoned, they'd make a trophy for his pursuer, but what the hell, he had saved his skin and that was a lot more precious . . . And yet, it might have been riddled with holes!

Later, in the submarine, it had dawned on him

what had happened. The lieutenant had been wearing only a pair of bathing shorts. By God, that was it! That thing in the boat had been an effigy turned with the back to him, silent and motionless, with the lieutenant's jacket over the shoulders and with his hat on the head. Fishing! The lieutenant had stripped and in a frogman suit, his sub-machine gun in a plastic case, had made his way to the bank. He must have made a small circuit, and then suddenly appeared behind 07.

A simple but ingenious trick!

After that, 07 had an effigy of himself made, with the upper part of the body of rubberised cloth. When it was deflated he could carry it around in his pocket. A vial of compressed air would fill it in a matter of seconds.

And this is how the two men guarding the villa were going to be outsmarted! The pretty guide from the Kaliakra Hotel would be embracing an effigy!

He was so satisfied with the world that when the chambermaid came in to pour some fresh water into the vase, he put his arm round the girl's waist and drew her to him. The girl did not seem particularly surprised, she only went on holding the pitcher. Then his hand slipped down the curve of her knee, lingering a second or two on the cool skin before travelling upwards. Who said that marble was the smoothest thing under the sun?

This piece of living marble had muscles and his hand felt them go rigid, then wake with life. So this white-aproned girl had the hips of a sportswoman! Lying on the chaise-longue, he could not see her

face, but that didn't matter. He drew her closer to him. The cluster of amber grapes hanging so near him made him giddy.

Then the empty ice-cold pitcher struck him on the chest. He was aware of the sensation because his chest was bare and his skin hot with the sun. Ice! The girl pulled herself away and burst out of the room. There was no more vine. Only the hunger in his mouth, hunger and nothing else.

VARNA, July 12-19, 196—

Avakoum rarely went out. For hours he would pace back and forth in his room, smoking. Then he would step out onto the veranda, and sit there, leaning against the parapet as he looked out—at the sea, the waves, the horizon. Everything—and nothing. During one of his rare walks in town, he bought a book of mathematical problems, solved the most difficult ones then discarded it.

When he had had enough of staying in his room, he went down to the beach, took off his robe and went in to the sea. He seemed to get no pleasure from this at first. He would frown as he went in deeper and deeper until the water came up to his shoulders. The great force rocked him, trying to overturn him as if in jest. Just as a lioness would rock her cub, carefully and playfully. It was a game, wasn't it? The cruel claws were hidden, the steel-like muscles relaxed and soft. A game! Then he would take another step, the last, and the game would be over. A bottomless maw would suddenly gape, ready to swallow him, to snatch him away from the sky and hurl him into the dark fathomless depths. At that

instant his strength would wake and he would swing one arm, then the other, striking at the greedy maw which would snatch him away from the sun and rob his eyes of light.

The solemn moment would soon come. It always did when his willpower came to grips with a force *at least* equal to his own. His thoughts, knowledge, muscles and controlled instincts were like battalions which his willpower would hurl into combat. The sea, two or three miles from the shore, in calm weather, was a force which was his equal: it was an even fight and this would give rise to that solemn moment.

Then his strength would begin to ebb away while the sea lost none of its own. He withdrew defeated, concluding an honourable peace, because he *knew* when to retreat, because he never allowed himself to look pitiable.

Twice a day Captain Markov reported to Avakoum on happenings at the Small Villa, on Troffimov's movements about town and around Varna. Avakoum took notes when necessary. In the evening he kept in touch with Colonel Vassilev's base on 07's whereabouts. The Englishman's movements had continued to be innocuous. Every evening he met Belcheva, invariably rowing with her in a boat close to the shore-line till late at night. He always hired the boat from "chance" boatmen.

Once Avakoum told Vassilev:

"Why don't you have several chance boats tapped? We could be lucky."

"I'll get my men onto it," Vassilev replied.

The following day Vassilev told him over the radio:

"Nothing doing! From nine-thirty to ten-forty-five

last night, he spoke of nothing but the islands of Tahiti and Samoa, of their vegetation and local customs. Nothing peculiar, not a single suspicious sentence. Just as I'd expected."

Avakoum answered:

"The recording sounds good and it makes me suspect that 07 realised that his boat was tapped. Don't let his boat get out of sight and step up your surveillance."

At this point the Colonel went into a rage.

"Damn it all, Zahov, 07 is my man. You just concentrate on Troffimov and the Small Villa!"

During the next few days things went on as usual.

VARNA, July 19, 196—

Then lightning struck out of the blue.

The Symposium had finished its work. In his concluding speech Prof. Konstantin Troffimov predicted a great future for quantum electronics. "It will turn labour into joy, it will enable man to unravel the secrets of prime matter, and change his thoughts into a ray which will know no bounds. Then the constellations will become as accessible and close to him as bus stops."

They nearly brought the house down with the applause. Some of the foreign newspapermen urged him to elaborate on the "ray". The professor smiled as he asked them not to pay any attention to the word—it was a mere *image*, a literary image. They also enquired if that "ray" had anything to do with "the one" he was said to have discovered and which was reported to have . . . but the professor interrupted them:

"There are so many kinds of rays," he said, "that it would take me months to list and explain them all." Then he advised them not to fear any kind of rays:

"Poets write about rays: moon rays, sun rays, star rays and so on. To man the ray has come to symbolise beauty. There isn't a single Soviet scientist who would destroy the beauty of such a popular notion," he assured them. There was applause again, but some of the journalists were visibly dissatisfied with his answer.

07 was among the newspapermen frantically applauding the professor.

"You'll hurt your hands," Trofimov's secretary, Natalia Nikolaevna, said in French, smiling at him.

Such a smile! Repin's "Lady in White" was smiling at him. Natalia Nikolaevna was in white, sparkling and radiant.

07 whispered into her ear:

"For those words of *his* I would have worn out another pair of hands . . ." he said in faultless Russian, ". . . another hundred pairs of hands if I had had them!" He got carried away by his enthusiasm.

Natalia Nikolaevna laughed and shook her head.

Perhaps they would have said something more had not Stanilov touched her shoulder just then, pointing to the professor who was hurrying to his car with Markov walking behind him.

Avakoum saw 07 take Stanilov by the arm and whisper something to him, looking after Natalia. Stanilov burst into laughter and clapped 07 on the back in a familiar fashion.

Going their separate ways the cars and the audi-

ence dispersed and the square in front of the theatre again assumed its every-day appearance.

"Comrade Major!"

Somebody was violently shaking him by the shoulder.

The minute he opened his eyes, their pupils reflecting Markov's scared face, he already knew half of the awful truth. Wide awake, he jumped out of bed and rushed to the chair where he had put his clothes.

"I've just called the 'valet'," Markov said in a voice that verged on panic. "There's no answer! No answer! The guard on the landing is also silent! I called the lodge in the courtyard. Again no answer. It's as silent as the grave! The wire's been cut!"

The floor under Avakoum's feet swayed once, then a second time. An icy sensation gripped his chest. He shook his head, taking a deep breath.

"Stop whimpering, damn you, and put Plan A into effect," he shouted. "Immediately."

It had sounded like a shout to him, but he had actually uttered the words in a perfectly flat voice.

Markov dialled a number and was immediately put through to the District Centre.

Plan A was: to cordon off the area around the Small Villa at once, to close down all exits to the surrounding towns, to raise an alert in the naval centre and to block the ports on the coast. Two minutes had passed. Avakoum was tying a knot in his necktie.

With Markov and two sergeants and Avakoum at the wheel of the Jeep, they sped to the Small Villa. It was just after two a.m. The upper floor was in

darkness. There was a light only in the small rectangular window in the front door. As the Jeep drew up with a screech before the garden gate, the patrol sergeant dashed out towards them. The militiaman was at his post ten steps away.

The night was warm and quiet and the world looked so tranquil, submerged in peaceful slumber.

"Have you seen anybody come out of here?" Avakoum barked as he jumped down from the Jeep.

Markov and the two sergeants ran to the gate.

"Yes, Comrade Major!" the sergeant replied. "Some twenty minutes ago Director Stanilov left in his car."

"Sol" Avakoum looked towards the light in the small rectangular window. "Exactly!"

"Was he alone?" he asked. Hammers pounded on his temples.

"I don't know!" the sergeant answered. "The blinds were down on the windows of his Citroen. He may not have been alone . . ."

The second "gardener" was asleep. He had left the house an hour earlier when his comrade had relieved him. While at his post, he had noticed nothing suspicious. The Soviet professor, his secretary and Stanilov had returned to the villa a little after eleven p.m. They were in a good mood, the "valet" had served them cognac and then they had all gone to their rooms, turning off the lights shortly afterwards.

One of the sergeants questioned the second "gardener". He noticed that the telephone wire coming out of the Small Villa had been cut a yard or two below the roof of the lodge.

Meanwhile the others had rushed up the winding marble staircase to the second floor. On the landing, his face down, and across the steps, sprawled the

corpse of the other "gardener". His arms were flung to one side as if he had been flung down from a great height. Under his head a small pool of blood showed dark against the blue velvet of the carpeted stairs.

Avakoum cast a glance at Markov which meant: "Look him over!" and stepped carefully over the body. He reached the second landing and stood facing the door of the "buffet" room. It was closed. He used his handkerchief in turning the bronze doorknob.

On the floor, between the sofa and the bar, the "valet" lay on his back. He was gagged and his mouth was bleeding. Bits of cottonwool protruded from his nostrils. One of the sergeants crouched by the body and removed the cottonwool and the piece of cloth, soaked in blood. Both cloth and cottonwool gave off a strong smell of chloroform and of some other anaesthetic with a pungent odour.

"Rush him to the hospital right away!" Avakoum ordered. "He may still be alive! Send these things over to the chemical lab of the Centre for analysis at once!" He pointed to the piece of cloth and the cottonwool.

Now the two bedrooms remained.

The doors of the two rooms stood open. There was a draught and the curtains in the window frames fluttered about as if alive.

In each room the unmade beds were empty. It seemed as if Troffimov and his secretary, Natalia Nikolaevna, had got up without haste, threw off the bedclothes and started dressing. Having dressed, they had carefully packed their suitcases and gone.

Nothing had been left behind.

They went down to Stanilov's apartment.

Stanilov's bedroom was in a shambles. It was as if

a tornado had swept through it. Not a single chair stood upright.

"Don't touch anything!" Avakoum ordered. He turned to Markov:

"Get onto the District Centre. We'll need men and equipment."

Finally they made their way into the garage through the inner door, from the living room. Face down, the sentry lay in the small passage next to the garage. His right shoulder blade and jacket were soaked in blood.

Just then a group of men stormed into the house. The first to enter was Colonel Vassilev. He looked like a man who had just been handed a death sentence. His forehead was wet with sweat, his shirt collar was open, his necktie hung almost undone. His eyes were wild and desperate.

"Is he killed or missing?" he asked in a broken voice, his glance trailing towards the staircase. He was asking about Konstantin Trofimov.

"Missing!" Avakoum answered gruffly.

"Oh!" Vassilev shook his head, muttering after a short silence. "Well, killed or missing, it makes no difference now!"

"I suppose it doesn't!" Avakoum said. "You were reassuring me all the time: '07 is always before our eyes, every minute of the day and night.' Where is 07 now?"

"He fooled us," Vassilev muttered, flicking his tongue over his dry lips. "An effigy, inflated with air, was found next to Belcheva's body. He killed her. It was a smart trick, leaving a decoy like that."

"Is that all?" Avakoum asked him.

"We towed the boat ashore . . ." Vassilev whispered.

"Belcheva?" Avakoum added.

The Colonel nodded.

"Of course, he's no fool to leave a living witness behind!" Avakoum said.

"The effigy fooled me!" Vassilev sighed, sinking into a chair and lowering his head.

Avakoum ordered a search of 07's apartment at the House of Journalists and his fingerprints compared with the ones found in the Small Villa. The villa itself was combed from attic to cellar. He also ordered a twenty-four-hour contact maintained with the District Centre and with the Coast Guard.

Then he jumped into the Jeep and drove to his lodgings. He would have to inform Sofia of what had occurred and wait for instructions.

It was two-twenty a.m.

VARNA, July 20, 196—

A group of experts and staff members of Department B. of the Committee for State Security arrived in a special military plane an hour and a half later.

Avakoum's apartment was set up as a temporary Centre which was to collect and co-ordinate the results obtained by the various operative groups.

Up to eight o'clock in the morning the information came in as follows:

Coast Guard

One forty-five a.m.: order to block port, pier and coastline north and south of Varna.

Two a.m.: order to search the territorial waters—northeast-east, southeast-east.

Eight a.m.: no attempts made by any craft to put

out to sea. Nothing found as a result of search. Order to lift blockade; observation continued.

District Centre

One forty-five a.m.: cordon off the area round the Small Villa. Block exits, check all cars leaving city. Order despatched to towns and villages around Varna to check all motor vehicles stopping or passing through. Order to search roads in the vicinity of Varna.

Three a.m.: the body of Prof. Metodi Stanilov has been found. The corpse was dumped into the left-hand-side ditch a hundred metres after the seventeenth milestone on the Kavarna road. The body was in stockinged feet, with a scratch on the left ankle. A bruise on the jaw around the chin. A swelling caused by a strong blow. The face was blue, the teeth clenched, the eyes glazed. The body was immediately taken to the District Hospital for an autopsy.

Three thirty a.m.: two sergeants on the night patrol state they saw Prof. Stanilov's car: (1) leaving the Small Villa, (2) turning to the Kavarna road. Both sergeants are sure Stanilov was driving the car. The seat next to the driver was unoccupied. The blinds were down on the windows of the car.

At the same time: interrogation of witness Ivan Belchev, brother of Vera Belcheva, who was found murdered. He says his sister asked him to take her to the pier in his boat. He did not know the newspaperman Rene Lefevre in person, but suspected his sister was having an affair with him. She had hinted Rene Lefevre was going to get her a job as a correspondent in Switzerland.

Four a.m.: discrepancies found between the evidence given by witness Ivan Belchev and the testimony submitted by Nikola Peev, porter in the city transport network. On his way to the pier, half an hour before midnight, Peev had seen Ivan Belchev loitering near the motor boat landing stage. He knew him because he had lived near their house the year before. Ivan Belchev claimed before the inquest officer half an hour earlier that he had gone to bed a little after midnight. It seems Belchev was not in his bed at that time but on the pier as witness Peev asserts.

Six a.m.: a complaint lodged by the citizen Serafim Dimitrov. The evening before he had anchored his motor boat "Leda" at the landing stage but in the morning he found the craft was gone. He claims witnesses saw him moor his boat at the landing stage.

A message radioed to port authorities along the coast to search for the "Leda".

Seven a.m.: no trace, so far, either of Metodi Stanilov's car or of the "Leda".

District Hospital

Seven a.m.: both Vera Belcheva and Metodi Stanilov had died from the same instantaneous-action poison. Slight scratches caused by sharp object discovered on the two bodies just over the ankle of the left foot. The poison entered the blood stream through these scratches. The object that caused them had been dipped into a thick solution of the aforementioned instantaneous-action poison. Samples sent to the chemical laboratory to investigate poison.

Peter Stoyanov, "valet" in the Small Villa: his lower jaw fractured by a blow with a hard object.

Still in a coma caused by the inhalation of a large dose of anaesthetic.

Toma Lazarov, garage attendant at the Small Villa: a bullet lodged in the right wing of the lungs.

The Small Villa—Operative Group

The telephone wire in the courtyard has been cut.

Footmarks on the floor of the corridor leading out to courtyard. Same footprints detected along the length of the veranda and more of them below the windows of the two bedrooms.

Rene Lefevre's fingerprints discovered on the outer doorknobs of the two bedrooms. Same fingerprints blended with Metodi Stanilov's found on the inner doorknob leading straight into the garage.

Two stains of clotted blood discovered in Metodi Stanilov's bedroom, one on the carpet, the other on the back of the sofa. The experts' report found the blood from the second stain belong to the same group as the professor's.

A gold ring found. Witnesses claim the ring belonged to Rene Lefevre. Various figures to be seen on the inner side of the ring with a magnifying glass.

A sheet from Natalia Nikolaevna's bed is missing.

District Centre

Eight a.m.: a white sheet with the initials of the Small Villa found on the beach, almost touching the water, north of Golden Sands, some twenty kilometres up the coast, to the right of the Kavarna road. Only two types of footmarks discernible—shallow and deep ones.

Tracks of automobile tyres also found on the same spot, on the knoll of the shore. Signs on tyres unidentifiable because of the rocky ground.

General N. arrived from Sofia half an hour after the last item of information had come in. He was tired and pale.

He immediately enquired after Avakoum and on learning that about an hour before he had returned to the Small Villa, he knitted his eyebrows as he gave the terse order:

"Ask him to report to me at once!"

He lit a cigarette, instructed the man on duty to make plenty of coffee and bring in chairs. Then he opened the conference in the living room with the veranda, next to Avakoum's bedroom. Present were the department heads of the District Centre, the Coast Guard and the experts from Sofia.

A fine rain fell from a cloudy sky.

Avakoum came in at about nine thirty. He was splashed with mud all over as if he had been working his way through an underground tunnel. Despite the sleepless night, there was a special kind of calm about him. The morning was chilly, but brilliant with sunshine.

"It's only ten minutes from the Small Villa to this place . . ." General N. said irritably, looking ahead. He paused and then he added: "Sit down!"

Avakoum thanked him but asked for permission to change first. It would take only a couple of minutes, and perhaps in the meantime he might read the latest bulletin.

When, clean-shaven, he took his seat ten minutes later, he wore a dark grey suit and a striped necktie.

The conference came to an abrupt stop—everybody looked up at him in surprise.

He began to fill his pipe.

The General knew that habit of his—these were

moments of supreme concentration. Adding machines and computers for integral and differential calculus operating, working out equations in many unknowns, mechanical devices clicking, a multitude of signals fleetingly lighting up and finally—the ticker tape with the conclusions.

He was dressed for a holiday. An old habit. The General had known him for so many years! When Avakoum was on the warpath, he dressed as if for a special occasion. All right, let them hear what he had to say!

"Are you ready, Major Zahov?"

"This is the story briefly as I see it, judging by the information collected by our experts and also on the basis of some observations of mine.

"The clues tell us that 07 approached the villa *from the inside*. He did not climb over the wall, or up the rocks, and he did not go through the courtyard—either from the sea or by the front of the house. His only footmarks in the courtyard lead from the garage outer entrance to the right, towards the telephone wire.

"If somebody is barred from getting into a place *from the outside*, he will try to make it *from the inside*. Having reached his goal without moving *above ground*, he must have done so by moving *underground*. The logic is very simple. It says that 07 gained access to the villa through an underground entrance, an underground tunnel.

"What is the tunnel? Where does it begin and where does it lead? How does it connect with the villa *from the inside*?

"07 was kept under constant surveillance. Our sentries claim he did not visit any places which might

have taken him out of their field of vision. They also claim that he very persistently rowed about in the surf alongside the rocks near the Small Villa. There he sunbathed, swam and so on.

"Inference? 07 was trying to solve the problem—how to get inside the villa unnoticed—not by land, but from the sea; so the coastal strip became the principal object of his exploration. Finally he did find what he had been searching for—and that determined the further stages of his master-plan.

"Certain that 07 had acted precisely in this way, I decided to follow in his footsteps—to discover what he had already lighted on. At dawn I took a boat out rowing around the rocks. I put on frogman gear and dived to explore that part of the shore that is submerged.

"I came upon just what I had expected. A narrow crevice between the rocks, with the mouth hidden about a metre under water. A few metres further in, the cleft rose, leading like a cone-shaped tunnel into the interior.

"Lighting my way with a flashlight, walking and crawling on all fours, I thus covered some thirty metres. The underground passage ended in a smooth stone wall, its height reaching up to my shoulders. At the foot of the wall I found a number of interesting objects to which I shall return later on. The uppermost section of the wall had a natural opening, even a broad-shouldered man could have easily squeezed his way through. I went through the opening and into a long and narrow shaft, with concrete walls and a concrete floor stained with grease and blackened with gasoline. My head almost touched a ceiling made of thick deal planks . . .

"I had emerged into the garage of the Small Villa . . .

"Thus, on his 'cruises', seeking ways and means of gaining access to the Small Villa, 07 came upon the crevice leading into the garage drainage canal. Vera Belcheva supplied him with a face-mask, an oxygen cylinder and an aqualung. She got them from her brother, Ivan Belchev, who happened to be an amateur deep-sea diver. He confessed an hour ago that it was his equipment.

"Now, 07 made his first attempt in the dead of night, one day after Trofimov's arrival. He entered the garage of the Small Villa through the crevice and the shaft. He went back the same way he had come. The boat waited for him further north, between the House of Journalists and the Small Villa. During all that time, Belcheva had sat embracing his effigy, and the guards were lulled into a false security. Colonel Vassilev's men thought everything was under control: the person under surveillance was before their eyes all the time. But at that minute 07 was swimming underwater along the coast and for reasons unknown at present, he was forced to surface and swim ashore. He took off the face-mask and the cylinder, something probably needed fixing. At that moment, cruising around the coast in our motor boat, Captain Markov saw his figure—the moon was up, remember? Badly shaken, he sped to the base and rang up Vassilev. The wolf was prowling around in the sheep-fold! But Vassilev told him to mind his own business and to stop dreaming. 07 was in the boat, before the eyes of his men all the time!

"And so the days went by in peace: nothing much happened at the Small Villa, nothing to arouse alarm.

07 went on living unobtrusively, met no other suspicious characters besides Vera Belcheva, showing no special interest in Troffimov. He kept up his relations with Belcheva, played bridge with his acquaintances, sunbathed, and went rowing in a boat. On her part, Vera Belcheva did not contact any suspects, the chain was locked between those two. No third party. An arrangement of the classical type!

"The Symposium was over and Prof. Troffimov's departure drew near. Nobody knew when he might leave, things had to be rushed! Any minute the prey would slip through his fingers.

"A day or two earlier, 07 had taken the equipment he needed for his operation to the mouth of the shaft. Two glass vials, a hundred grammes each, filled with a quick-action anaesthetic; two injections to induce a deep and prolonged sleep, a metal box with a syringe and a package of cottonwool. In his plastic case he had: a light suit, probably a shirt and a pair of trousers; a gun with a silencer and a pair of special shoes. The upper right-hand-side of his right shoe had a sharp steel blade fitted in, showing only a few millimetres sideways. The blade had been dipped into a thick solution of an instantaneous-action poison of the curare type. All these things, carried in one or two trips, lay hidden in the crevice near the bottom of the shaft.

"On the evening of the twentieth, shortly before midnight, 07 left the banquet hall of the Casino, where the Chairman of the City People's Council of Varna was giving a gala dinner. Prof. Troffimov and his secretary had left the hall about an hour earlier. 07 wore a light alpaca evening suit, a white shirt

and a black tie. He also wore the specially doctored shoe.

"He walked to the pier where a boat had just arrived with two persons aboard—Vera Belcheva and her brother, Ivan. Ivan left the boat, striking off for the landing stage, where motor boats and barges lay moored.

"07 began to row and about ten minutes later the boat was drifting some fifty metres away from the Small Villa. 07 dropped the anchor and the lovers embraced.

"Or so it appeared.

"The moon was going down. In the liquid darkness, 07 slumped down on the bottom of the boat to change into his frogman gear. Deflated, the effigy lay next to him. He unscrewed the compressed-air vial and within a second or two, the empty rubberised effigy was inflated and propped up—a real 07, in 07's jacket. Belcheva and the effigy sat with their backs to the shore.

"The moon had set. Before diving into the sea, 07 'accidentally' touched the girl's left ankle. Did she pay any attention to the slight scratch?"

Avakoum continued: "07 was already swimming underwater towards the cliffs, which walled in the Small Villa. He knew what was going on in the boat at that very minute, but he did not think about it. The girl lay convulsed in the throes of death next to his effigy. His only witness and accomplice had to disappear from the world. The job demanded it.

"Starlight. Colonel Vassilev's sentries were not surprised to see only 07 in the boat. That had happened before. Maybe the girl was resting or sleeping!

But it was 07 they were watching, so they were at ease. He was there, right before their eyes.

"But he was already in the shaft, dressed and equipped to carry out his mission. He picked the right moment to prise up a plank and take aim at the sentry in the garage, felling him with one soundless shot.

"He stealthily climbed up the staircase. On the topmost landing he shot the other guard. The guard groaned as he rolled down the steps, his arms flung out, his face down. Dazed with sleep, the 'valet' had jumped up to open the door, but 07 was already on the threshold, striking the man's jaw with his gun, and the 'valet' sank to the floor.

"The 'valet' was put out of the way and now the second round began. The Englishman stole out through the living room onto the veranda. The windows of both bedrooms were open. He drew the curtain aside, slipping into the first bedroom. 07 could tell by the breathing that it was occupied by the professor. He brought the cottonwool padding close to the sleeping man's nose. One second, two, three. 07 was patient. The breathing became irregular and lower, it was hardly audible. Then he took the syringe out of his pocket, and gripping the professor's arm at the elbow, plunged the needle into the muscles.

"It was an expert job because he had had a lot of practice at this. Now the professor would be fast asleep for many hours, perhaps for many days and nights.

"He did the same in the other bedroom. Natalia Nikolaevna also went into a death-like sleep.

"07 was thorough. After the job was finished, he

left nothing behind, putting everything back in his pockets, even the vials.

"Then, one after the other, he took both Konstantin Trofimov and Natalia Nikolaevna into Stanilov's car. His muscles were well-trained and carrying them, 60 to 65 kilograms each, was a mere detail. He went back for their luggage, leaving nothing behind. He placed the two drugged persons on the back seat, covering them with the sheet he had snatched off Natalia Nikolaevna's bed.

"That done, he tiptoed into Stanilov's room and roughly kicked him out of bed. Two slaps across the face brought him back to consciousness. They fought like two tigers. Why, we don't know. But the thieves had fallen out. Perhaps Stanilov was beginning to crack and 07 was ensuring his tracks would be completely covered. Anyway, in his jacket and trousers, with no shoes on his feet, Stanilov sat behind the wheel of the Citroen—that was the final act. Maybe he felt the barrel of the gun at his back?

"07 had cut the telephone wire and sat in the back of the car with the unconscious professor and his secretary. The blinds were down. Stanilov started the engine.

"There's only one inexplicable moment in the story," Avakoum said. "Which of them opened the door leading out to the street?

"The Citroen emerged into the street with all due ceremony. The sergeant on duty saluted and Stanilov returned the greeting. The car took the Kavarna road.

"At that time Ivan Belchev was carrying out his sister's instructions. He unmoored the "Leda"—Serafim Dimitrov had himself given him the key to the padlock for a small sum in dollars. The young man

was going to cruise around for awhile, probably with a girl, and would return the motor boat, and the money would come in handy.

"He brought the motor boat to the spot he had had pointed out by his sister beforehand. Then he took to his heels and went home. It was about three in the morning. Half an hour later the militia picked him up for questioning at the District Centre.

"The Citroen tore along the Kavarna road. At the 17th milestone 07 ordered Stanilov to stop and move over to the passenger seat, himself taking the wheel. Sitting down, he 'accidentally' touched Stanilov's left ankle with the blade of his right shoe. Stanilov instantaneously contorted in death agony. 07 dragged him out of the car and over the asphalt, dumping the body into the ditch, to the left of the road.

"He drove, then, three or four minutes later, he put on the brakes. He got out, looked around and re-entered the car. He swung the car right, bringing it some twenty steps away from the sea. A beach, a small cove where Ivan Belchev had moored the boat. In the shimmer of the headlights it looked like a giant fish rocking near the shoreline.

"07 carried Troffimov and the girl down to the sand, where he left them. Then he drove the car to the top of the knoll and let it run downhill, towards the water, he himself jumping out when the car was in motion. In an instant, a sharp splash, then silence again. The sea had swallowed up the car.

"Then, all he had to do was bundle the Russians into the motor boat, and he would be on his way . . ."

Deep in thought, Avakoum did not speak for some time. His pipe had long since gone out.

"Where to?" He shrugged his shoulders. "At the

moment I am not in a position to answer that question. I don't know . . ."

Instructions were issued to send 07's photo by radiotelegraphy to the respective frontier and militia posts; to continue the search of the coast and the coastal towns and villages and to inspect all vessels leaving Bulgarian ports and Bulgarian territorial waters.

At noon, General N., some of his staff and Avakoum Zahov left for Sofia in a special plane.

SOFIA, July 20, 196—

Avakoum placed his luggage by the entrance, opened the door to the veranda, then walking up to his tasseled armchair, he sank into its battered springs and closed his eyes.

The house was empty. He was alone.

Motionless, he sat in the old tasseled armchair, weighing his guilt before men. And he felt it was immense. It glared him in the face, towering like a mountain—no passes, no pathways anywhere, only glaciers and snow-capped peaks, one higher than the other.

The fact was inescapable. He had allowed Troffimov to be kidnapped and 07 to slip through his fingers.

He sat for more than an hour.

The ancient clock with its bronze pendulum struck twice.

He rose, squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. Then he turned on the electric boiler, and while he waited for the water to heat up, he sat

down at his desk and started to do problems in higher mathematics. They helped to relax him.

He arrived at the Committee at five-four, p.m.

The conference of the head officers had just ended. Avakoum almost bumped into one of the Chairman's Deputies in the waiting-room in front of General N.'s office. He apologised, and for the first time his voice sounded shaky, for the first time in his life he felt the heat of confusion flood his face. The best student called up to the blackboard had failed to solve the problem.

"How are you?" the Deputy smiled at him with restraint, offering him his hand. Nevertheless he had smiled and the way he pressed his hand seemed to imply a smile of good feeling.

"Have you had a rest?" he asked, his eyes travelling over Avakoum with concern.

"I'm not tired," Avakoum said defensively. The man was sorry for him. He turned away.

The Deputy put his hand on his shoulder, smiling at him more warmly than ever before.

"General N. is expecting you," he said. "There are certain new developments in the case. After you hear them, perhaps you'll think them over. We do not regard this business as a closed issue. On the contrary!" His clear green eyes were ablaze and his face had become firm-set, like dark bronze.

"General N.'s waiting for you," he said, nodding his head as he went on his way.

The windows were open but the room was still filled with cigarette smoke. N. was reading a blue-covered file. He did not return Avakoum's salute, merely motioning him to an armchair next to his desk. He said, without looking up:

"You may smoke if you wish."

He finished reading, removed his glasses and looked at Avakoum. In the grey frame of that tired face his eyes were shining with vigour.

"Troffimov will still be alive," he began. "They can't afford to dispose of him until they have prised all his secrets loose. When they have got all they need, perhaps then . . ." He shrugged.

The General produced two documents from the file and showed them to Avakoum.

"Two coded radiograms," he said. "The first one was intercepted yesterday noon, twelve hours before the professor was kidnapped, and the second one came through today, again at noon. Calling signals: CSL. Code sign: 'Light'. One-way transmission."

Avakoum picked up the first radiogram. Decoded, it ran like this:

"Post office window 230 stop bill of lading No. . . ." Four five-digit numbers were indicated. The text followed:

"A will take care of shipping consignment."

The second radiogram contained only two sentences:

"The Mediterranean stop July twenty-third."

Both radiograms were in French.

"We assume," General N. said, "that with the first radiogram the Centre, organising and directing the kidnapping, instructed when to start the operation and where to take the professor. The second coded message intercepted today by our radio services, contains only two instructions: 'The Mediterranean' and 'July twenty-third'. One could suppose that with its second radiogram the Centre ordered 07 to steer for the Mediterranean and to await further instruc-

tions on July twenty-third concerning the next stages of the operation. Yet, on the other hand, the word 'Mediterranean' could mean anything. A code word. A town, perhaps, a port, a State, another sea. Maybe they're trying to throw us off on the wrong scent and have us look for the professor in the Mediterranean, while in actual fact he may be some place else, in the Alps or the Baltic, for example."

"That's very possible," Avakoum agreed.

"That is why," General N. went on, "it is of paramount importance for us to know the content of the *first* radiogram. In its first message the Centre instructs 07 as to the *place* where he is to take the professor. Consequently, it might offer us *the first clue leading to the professor*. If this clue proves to lead to the Mediterranean, we may safely assume that 'the Mediterranean' in the second radiogram is not just a symbol, but it means what it says. In that case, we would positively know that Prof. Troffimov will be somewhere in the Mediterranean on *July twenty-third*."

The General paused.

"But you can see for yourself," he resumed, after a moment, "that *four* five-digit numbers in the message have not been decoded, the meaning of which we've so far been unable to break open. Are these figures *symbols* hiding the names of ports, or railroad stations or airports?"

General N. shrugged his shoulders

"They will be decoded, but time is flying, flying! The *twenty-third* is the day after tomorrow."

Avakoum did not hear the last words. He was silently looking with concentration at the first radiogram, at the figures, a small jungle with no trails

broken either to the left or to the right, to the north or the south . . .

Then a cog started turning in the machine. These *riddles* had always to be looked at within the framework of the situation *already* created. The first radiogram disclosed *only* the first stage of the operation of shipping "the consignment". When something was being shipped, its destination had to be indicated as well. Where to? That always required a *place* designation.

The cogs were turning at lightning speed.

All right, places were designated with words. But the decoding machine said the four five-digit numbers did not form words. What then? Then these figures mean *what they say* and nothing else, i.e., *everything!*

Avakoum rose and paced up and down the office. Producing a sheet of paper, folded in two, from his pocket, he placed it beside the first radiogram. For some time he stood looking at his piece of paper and at the radiogram. Then he smiled.

He stood before the large map, between the tall iron safe and the General's desk.

"Could you get me a scaled rule and a pair of compasses?"

When those were brought in, he measured a scaled segment with the compasses and said, as he projected the segment east of the meridian on which Varna lay:

"I shall simply indicate some points. For instance, the spot 07 stopped with his motor boat to load his 'consignment' aboard a ship in transit or a submarine . . . Then . . ."

He pencilled two marks on the map, but very lightly, so that they could be erased later.

"As a matter of fact . . ." he said, ". . . it was you who suggested this idea to me, I've merely given it a *geographical* formulation." He showed the General his piece of paper. "I've copied the figures, barely visible on 07's ring, onto this sheet of paper. They form a four-digit number, the figure 4242. Now, I can see that each of the undecoded figures in the radiogram begins with 4242. Thus, before he arrived in Bulgaria, 07 was told on a certain date he would get a coded radio message in Varna through Vera Belcheva. He was to decode the radiogram with such and such a key. Four of the five-digit numbers would denote the co-ordinates of the points where the 'consignment' was to be taken and later delivered. The first figures of the number denoting the determined co-ordinates were engraved on 07's gold ring to avoid an error, which might have had fatal consequences for the entire operation."

Crossing to the General's desk, Avakoum stubbed out his cigarette in the glass ashtray. He went on:

"One should assume with an absolute certainty that it was on July nineteenth at noon that 07 was notified of the places where the 'consignment' was to be 'taken' and 'delivered'. That fact alone testifies to a deep-laid plot and to a very small number of people informed in advance of the moves to be brought off at the various stages of the operation . . .

"07 had already decoded the message. The first figure on his ring was 'four'. He looked for a figure in the decipherment which should begin with a 'four'. He found it in the first column of the third row: 43305.

"The co-ordinates of a geographical point are established through the location by co-ordinates of

the latitude N and the longitude E and are calculated in degrees, minutes and seconds. 07 was not interested in seconds, so he crossed off the last figure '5'. The number '4330' remained, which actually denotes north latitude of 43 degrees and 30 minutes.

"'Proceeding' in the same manner in respect to the other three five-digit numbers, 07 calculated the co-ordinates of the determined geographical points. The first point is . . ." Avakoum indicated the map with his pencil, ". . . about 30 miles northeast of Varna in international waters. The second point lies in the water in the vicinity of Istanbul.

"Thus the first radiogram ordered 07 to show up at two-thirty a.m. (post office window 230!) at a predetermined point in the sea with the following co-ordinates: 43° 30' NL; 28° 40' EL.

"Having found the direction and calculated the distance with the aid of any map (that had been done the afternoon before the kidnapping!), he sailed in Seraphim Dimitrov's motor boat and arrived at the predetermined point in the sea with the aid of a compass. A submarine or a ship in transit waited for him there. He transferred the 'consignment' (both the professor and Natalia Nikolaevna were still asleep) before scuttling the motor boat.

"The ship in transit or the submarine set a course south and perhaps twenty miles out of Istanbul, 07 and his fellow-passengers were picked up by a special sea-going craft.

"At dawn the ship had already left the Straits. At this very minute she is probably steaming ahead somewhere in the Mediterranean."

Avakoum put the pencil and compasses on the

desk, let himself into the armchair and slowly filled his pipe.

He forced himself to do this slowly because he felt his fingers rushing headlong, he felt everything in him, even his heart, rushing headlong. Yes, the *ray* glittered somewhere in the murky distance and he had to follow it at once. He did not exactly know where it was, but he had to march out—even the furniture in the office, the desk, the chairs and the electric clock were full of eyes spurring him on: go, go!

He slowly filled his pipe because his fingers must not betray him.

"Judging by the second radio message . . ." Avakoum said, ". . . 07 will get instructions about the further stages of the operation in the Mediterranean, not earlier than July 23rd, i.e. in two and a half days' from now. I suppose, under the conditions, a ship with this sort of 'cargo' aboard will not stop at every big port, but will sail straight on, 'transit' if possible, at the greatest speed imaginable. Thus it can be assumed that the ship will be somewhere between Marseilles and Algiers in two and a half days."

The General was finishing his second cigarette.

"Between Marseilles and Algiers," Avakoum repeated.

"Probably," General N. said. He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray, frowning and giving a cough. His eyes smarted with the damned smoke. He had grown out of the habit and now his eyes wept treacherously. "Yes, you're probably right."

"We will find them," Avakoum said firmly.

"Zahov . . ." General N. said abruptly. Now he

was stern and concentrated. "I'm calling a conference. Agenda: Measures to rescue Professor Trofimov. You will attend."

"Yes, Sir."

A warm breeze blew in through the open window. There was a garden nearby, across the next street, and the babble of children's voices drifted in, mingled with a slight aroma of jasmine.

Part 3

PARIS, July 22, 196—

FROM THE PLANE the Eiffel Tower was a giant filigree finger, soaring into the sky with a little knitted cap on top. The houses were like children's toys. The rectangles of green spaces, the blue ribbon of the Seine slashed by bridges here and there moving closer and closer, leaping upwards, growing bigger and bigger. The annoying buzz in the ears, the scraping of metal in the distance, the screeching of the tyres and the bump as the plane touched down, followed by the return of the sense of stability. Then they had stopped, but the ringing was still in Avakoum's ears.

Le Bourget. Avakoum walked up and down between the souvenir shops in the big lobby stacked with perfumes, paperbacks, dolls and chocolates. He bought a *Paris Match*, closely observing as he did so the people milling about him mirrored on the nickel frames of the glass case.

Then he went out into the square and called a taxi.

After countless stops—these red traffic lights were maddening—the taxi turned left, circling the Place de l'Etoile, before finally emerging into the Avenue Rapp. It swerved left again, squeezing between rows of taxis and modestly coming to a halt in front of the unostentatious entrance of Hotel V.

Seven years before, Avakoum had spent nearly eleven months at this hotel as Edward Szeromski, a Pole from Canada. Almost a year. He had been

specialising in the restoration of ancient vases and mosaics.

"Monsieur Edward?"

"Mademoiselle Nadine?"

Since he had last seen her, Nadine had grown slightly plumper. She had been nineteen then. In those days too, she had been a chambermaid. Now she sat in the reception office, filling out cards, giving and taking the keys of patrons.

"You've had a streak of good luck, Nadine!"

"Well . . . Yes . . . It's not bad . . . I" She smiled at him, examining him with knowing eyes. "But, for heavens' sake, Edward! You've changed so!"

Changed, changed . . . Of course . . . During those years there had been the Icherenski case, the affair of the foot-and-mouth disease, the infra-red glasses, the Sleeping Beauty . . . A hundred years, dear Nadine, a hundred years!

"Business . . ." Avakoum said.

"Business?" The feeling of reverence mingled with the memory of love. "Oh!" Nadine said.

"I'm an art dealer, pictures . . ." Avakoum explained.

"I remember, I remember now . . ." Nadine said. "You're an artist. Ah, that doesn't pay well . . . But picture deals, I've heard, can bring in a lot of money . . ."

Avakoum nodded. "It's largely a matter of luck." He changed the subject. "Nadine, dear, how about room No. six. Do you remember?"

Her smile was arch. "I certainly do, Monsieur!"

Room six was luckily free. She handed him the key and told him she would fill out the card if he would just please sign here, below.

Avakoum signed the registration card and drank in Nadine's perfume as her head nearly touched his shoulder. The same perfume, he remembered it as he did everything else.

He had dinner in the cafe next door. While he had his coffee he glanced at the evening papers—all of them announcing "Konstantin Troffimov's strange flight from Varna" in big black headlines. He was said to have fled from the Russian army men who had intended using his discovery for military purposes. There was much speculation. One journal boldly announced that Troffimov had defected.

It was just after eleven when Nadine knocked at his door. He pretended he had just awakened from a sound sleep. He yawned, asking her to wait while he took a shower. Fifteen minutes, no more.

There was a closet in front of the bedroom. The closet led into a small living room which in its turn opened into the bathroom. Avakoum locked the closet, took the portable transistor radio out of his valise and entered the bathroom. He turned on the hot water tap to fill the bathtub. Then he sat in front of the mirror, turning his notebook to an "empty" page and pressing the small wheel of the transistor radio.

It was eleven ten sharp.

Dots and dashes crowded in from the ether.

Ten minutes later Avakoum was decoding the message.

Radio message Light intercepted. Text as follows: "July twenty-fifth Spartel. There pick up Hans following day. He'll wait near Dragon Code word number four. Anchor at entry of port. All outsiders barred. Only you and Fran-

cois go ashore. After Hans' arrival keep to course agreed on." Our own instruction—Get in touch with 'W' for directions.

The hot water was streaming over his shoulders. It felt good. He thought about 07. Even if the Englishman had escaped to the Great Nebula in Andromeda, he would chase him up there and bring back the ray. Now, how many unknowns were there? First—Hans. Second—the Dragon. Third—code word number four. An equation in three unknowns. When he found the unknowns the key would turn in the lock of the prison cell door and Konstantin Troffimov and Natalia Nikolaevna would be freed. He must contact 'W' immediately.

"Nadine, my dear, are you bored to death?"

"Oh!" Nadine yawned. "I'm all right. I must have dozed off . . ."

"I'll run out to get a bottle of wine and a few other things . . ." He opened the front door and went out.

It was midnight. The grounds around the Eiffel Tower. Under its southern vault:

"Monsieur Didier?"

A tall man, his white collar turned over his jacket.

"Non, mais je suis Monsieur Joseph!"

"Could you tell me the time?"

The man with the white collar answered that it was probably two p.m. Avakoum extended his left hand. They shook their left hands. Then the lift took them up to the second landing of the tower. An ocean of lights blazed below them. Through that ocean the Champs Elysees flowed like a stream of mother-of-pearl.

They both smoked, enjoying the lights. Avakoum

quoted the text of the radio message in a low voice. They spoke in French, his companion softening his vowels, especially the a's and o's and drawing them out. He said:

"You see, we have so far intercepted four such messages, containing almost the same text, but with different place designations. Your radio message lists 'Spartel', the port of Tangier. Spartel is the name of the lighthouse there. The other message mentions place names suggesting ports in the Mediterranean, the Bay of Biscay and the English Channel. Whether the ship will anchor in Malaga, San Sebastian, Le Havre or Tangier, we do not know for the present. Neither do we know what ship it is. Hundreds of vessels are afloat in the Mediterranean. But we have sent out our men to San Sebastian, Malaga and Le Havre. You are to leave for Tangier. I'll give you a passport and inside it you'll find a note with the name and address of a person who'll help you. Your message is interesting because it mentions 'Hans'."

TANGIER, July 25, 1936—

It was three p.m. and the sweltering heat was almost unbearable. The sky hung over the city like a burning lid heaped with hot ashes.

Avakoum hired a taxi and asked the driver to take him to Banque de Maroc, Boulevard Mohammed V, 78.

He felt a little uncomfortable in the disguise that made him look at least twenty years older.

They emerged into the boulevard, shaded here and there by the fronds of palm trees, and with flat-roofed houses rising like stark white formations of sea foam, self-confident and solid-looking.

Avakoum asked the driver his name.

"Hassan," he replied. He was a young man in his early twenties, tall and sloe-eyed.

The car pulled up to the entrance of the bank.

"Wait for me, Hassan."

Avakoum went into the bank, which was a cool temple of dark marble. Adding machines and typewriters clattered in the depths of the temple while the pilgrims waited for their turn at the windows, dressed in suits of alpaca and linen, holding briefcases in their hands.

He had his cheque cashed, asked for some small change and went out.

Sallying forth from the marble coolness of the bank into the street he had the feeling he had plummeted down into a white-hot furnace. Hassan stood waiting near his cab.

"Right," Avakoum said, easing himself into the back seat. "Now take me to Rue Malendez-y-Pelayo!"

"Of course, Your Excellency!" Hassan answered, like a soldier at attention. He slammed the door of the taxi and with the lithe motion of a leopard, slipped into his seat behind the wheel.

Riding along Boulevard Pasteur, Avakoum repeated as they reached the crossing at La rue de la Liberte:

"Malendez-y-Pelayo, forty-seven! The German Consulate . . ."

"Yes, Monsieur."

Hassan . . ." Avakoum said when the beige Peugeot pulled up in front of No. 47. ". . . Take this money," and he offered him a handful of small coins, "and moisten your throat while I take care of a little matter here at the Consulate!"

"Oh, Your Excellency . . ." Hassan started to

protest, but he stretched out his hand, swiftly pocketing the money.

"If somebody asks you whom you're driving around, just say he's a Parisian!"

"A Parisian, Mohammed is my witness!" Hassan eagerly nodded assent. The small change made up quite a handsome amount of money. Even if he was flogged, he would go on saying His Excellency was from Paris!

Avakoum walked up to the registration clerk, nodded to him coolly and asked to see the list of the persons travelling on G.F.R. passports who had arrived in and departed from Tangier over the past week.

The clerk's bald shiny head took on the colour of an overripe melon. Little dark clouds flitted in his clear blue eyes.

"On what grounds, Monsieur?" he asked in French, his thin Teutonic lips twisting into a condescending and contemptuous smile.

This Frenchman was really going too far!

"I request . . ." Avakoum said in a voice that did not carry a note of request at all. ". . . that I see the list! I'd like to have a look at the list!"

The clerk bit into his lower lip. The little clouds in his eyes shot sparks at Avakoum.

"You shall see no list!" he retorted. "Please, leave!"

"Didn't they call from Bonn?" Avakoum was surprised. "Please, do remember!"

"You're beginning to annoy me." The clerk's finger hovered over a bell-push that was set into the counter. "If you don't leave, I shall have you removed."

"I'm very sorry . . ." Avakoum said. "I should have made it clear from the outset." He produced a card

from the inner pocket of his jacket, handing it politely to the clerk.

The clerk read the word "Interpol" on the card, then he saw it was in the name of Maurice Marsagnac, and that the photo on the card, confound it, was of the man standing before him. The card was stamped with the official seal.

"I see," the clerk murmured.

Five citizens of the German Federal Republic had arrived in Tangier that week. One had gone on to Johannesburg, another two had left for Dakar, the fourth had returned to Bonn, while the fifth . . . Paul Schellenberg, a professor, was still in Tangier, staying at the Hotel "Gibraltar" on Rue de la Liberte.

"This Max Schneider left for Dakar two days ago . . ." Avakoum began and broke off. "Can you recall the profession registered in his passport?"

"Of course, Monsieur! I remember distinctly." The clerk looked round, then he bent his head, whispering mysteriously in Avakoum's ear: "A travelling salesman!"

"Nol" Avakoum said.

"Yes!"

They beamed at each other, exchanging significant glances and nodding their heads. These racketeers in heroin and girls, these jewel thieves!

"Thank you very much!" Avakoum said.

"Not at all, Monsieur!"

The Hotel "Gibraltar" was a small, white-painted building set back from the street in a little garden. Avakoum inquired after Professor Schellenberg and had him pointed out by the doorman. The professor stood in the bar finishing off a glass of beer and was just about to go out. He was tall and his hair was

grey at the temples. He had a big fleshy face with baggy eyes.

"Hassan!" Avakoum said to the cab-driver. "How about earning another handful of coins?"

Hassan grinned. "I won't say no, Mohammed is my witness!"

"They're yours, then," Avakoum said. His eyes lingered on the tall man who was finishing his beer.

"Do you see the tall man standing at the bar? He'll leave in a minute or two and he'll probably walk towards the Grand Soco, or he'll cross the street on the way to the square. In either case your taxi must side-swipe him, but don't run him over because I'll be standing close by, and at the last minute I'll pull him back. I'll save his life, you see. You'll pretend you're furious because he was jaywalking, you'll curse him and speed down the street at the back of the French Consulate. Do you understand what I want you to do, my dear fellow?"

Hassan goggled his eyes at him.

"I want to do a good deed . . ." Avakoum smiled. "I've taken an oath before Allah to save a man from death and this is my chance to do it!"

Hassan went on rolling his eyes at him.

"You'll wait for me in front of the El Minzah tonight at eight!" Avakoum said. "I have a reservation at the El Minzah . . ."

The moment Hassan heard the name of the hotel, he sprang back to life at once, shoving the coins into his pocket with a gesture as swift as lightning.

"May Allah's will be done!" he mumbled, and jumped into the taxi. He backed up the car to get a better starting position.

A few moments later, Professor Schellenberg came

out of the bar squinting with displeasure at the sun which was setting beyond Spartel. He pulled his straw hat down on his head and walked with long, heavy strides towards the street that sloped to the beach. He crossed Rue de la Liberte diagonally, a little past the Belgian Consulate. He had got only three paces from the kerb when there was the screech of brakes behind him as the whirlwind flailed the air all around. He was just about to be hoisted up into the air when an iron hand wrenched him away and glued him to the spot. A beige Peugeot rumbled past, one step from the edge of the sidewalk, a fist shaking at him in the open window of the car.

"You were very lucky."

Schellenberg turned round to look at the man standing at his left shoulder.

Avakoum saw a tired face, yellow with fear, and big grey eyes dilated with horror.

"Nothing happened really . . ." Avakoum said.

Schellenberg put his hand over his heart, taking a deep breath. He seemed to be inhaling the air in tiny gulps.

"Did he frighten you?" Avakoum smiled at him. He took him by the elbow and led him over to the sidewalk.

"You don't feel sick, do you?"

"There's nothing the matter with me . . ." Schellenberg answered. "I was simply taken by surprise . . ." He spoke French with a German accent, as if pushing the words through his nose. "As a matter of fact, I was not surprised at all," he added inconsequently. Then he asked: "How did you happen to be here?"

"Quite by chance!" Avakoum replied. "I was crossing the street as you were."

"I see . . ." Schellenberg nodded, deep in thought. "Let's say it was like that." He let his arm fall and a vague smile played around his meaty lips. "Let's say it was just like that," he repeated. "But that doesn't change the situation, not by a hair's breadth. You saved my life, you pulled me from the jaws of death!" He gave a guttural laugh.

"Oh, hardly death—just a bruise maybe . . ." Avakoum smiled with restraint. The man was being suspicious.

"Bruise or death, I thank you . . ." He extended his hand.

Avakoum shook Schellenberg's hand which was clammy and flabby and altogether unpleasant to the touch.

"I know . . ." the professor said. "You simply did your duty . . ." and he laughed unexpectedly. "Well, it's only right for the rescued to buy his rescuer a drink!" Now he was the one to catch Avakoum by the arm. "You know, I don't like these places along Avenida d'Espena or along Boulevard Mohammed V because they're too noisy and one has the feeling of sitting in a barber's chair. A slight movement and you get cut on the cheek. A hundred pairs of eyes fixed on you, you can't even sneeze. I fancy the small places, across the Mendoubia, in the direction of the old medina. There one can have mackerel or squab as God ordained it, in a simple fashion, without a dozen sets of forks and knives to fool around with. What is your opinion in this matter?"

Avakoum said that he held no special opinion about it and for that reason he deferred to the other's taste in restaurants.

"You must have been in Tangier for quite some time now . . ." he said.

The professor looked at him suspiciously. He shook his head. Avakoum had the distinct impression that Schellenberg knew—or, at least, suspected—that Avakoum knew all there was to know about him.

Nevertheless, after they had introduced themselves, they walked back together along the street.

They passed under the Grand Soco Arch and turned left along Rue de la Kasbah, between the Soco Chico and the Mendoubia. They went into the yard of a quiet, out-of-the-way tavern, choosing a table right up to the trunk of a huge ancient cypress. As if perched on a giant hand, the Mendoubia garden with its cannons towered high opposite them.

Schellenberg ordered some wine and fried squab.

They were silent for some time and after they had had some wine, Schellenberg said:

"This has happened to me perhaps for the tenth time—a car side-swiping me like that. I must say I'm beginning to grow tired of it. I swear it! Last night somebody came stealing along the corridor and I felt him standing outside the door of my room. Any minute I expected him to unlock my door with a skeleton key and to start shooting at me from the threshold! Or throw a dagger at me, one of those two-edged things, you know. They tried that once in Munich. I was walking along a street when a flower-pot fell from a balcony and crashed at my feet. Terrible! That's why I'm telling you I'm really beginning to get sick of it all!"

The air was still and stuffy, but Avakoum gave an involuntary shiver. Was the professor mad or was he feigning "madness"?

"To your health!" Schellenberg raised his glass. He drank very fast, emptying his glass in one gulp. Then he ate ravenously. He ordered another squab with fried onions and raisins.

"I can't figure out who should be chasing you in cars or prowling around your room at night . . ." Avakoum said.

This time Schellenberg spoke the words his eyes had suggested a while before.

"Come off it now! You've been hired to guard me, they pay you quite a handsome sum for it, and you go asking questions on top of everything else! I don't like people who pretend to be so naive!"

"That's true, I am guarding you . . ." Avakoum said. "As God is my witness I'm here to look after you. But sometimes guards don't know *whom* they're supposed to protect and *against whom or what*. They just do their duty and that's all there is to it."

"God damn it to hell!" Schellenberg exclaimed. "You're talking much too loud! You French shout too much!"

"That's how it seems to you . . ." Avakoum smiled. "I'm whispering. You're the one who's shouting, not me!"

"Perhaps you're right . . ." Schellenberg agreed. "Don't be surprised, my nerves have been in a bad state lately. Especially after I made that decision, the devil take it! Cheers!" He drained his glass then laughed. "I envy you. Yes I do. I'm an electric engineer, you know. A physicist who once lectured in quantum mechanics at the University of Munich. But a year ago they told me: go to the devil, Schellenberg, we're fed up with all these petitions against you every month . . . True, petitions from good-for-

nothings, loafers and communists . . . But just the same . . . You know, the Poles sentenced you in your absence to fifteen years for crimes committed in Auschwitz and some of our university students . . . You do understand, don't you? You're a patriot, a great patriot! Of course, I understand, for heaven's sake. Since the peace of the university is involved! Here's my resignation, you don't have to worry about it!"

Avakoum leant back in his chair and listened. His eyes were fixed on the speaker's face.

Schellenberg spoke eagerly, as if just by talking about it the burden on his shoulders was eased. He continued:

"For a whole year I've been out of the University, I've had no laboratory and my heart is bleeding! I'm a zero without my millions of electron-volts, you understand? No spins any more, no conservation of strangeness, of parity, no symmetry of the anti-particles, no nothing. I feel I've been wandering about in a desert. Well! After all, I'm not the only one living like that! But all kinds of shadows have begun to haunt me! They've been after me for a year now—the Polish agents who want to kidnap me and put me in jail for fifteen years. You understand, don't you? I've been sentenced to fifteen years because at the time I designed something in Auschwitz—a little gadget which turned human flesh into ashes. A person of medium height became just two handfuls of ashes. I had my orders just like anyone else. Oh yes, it's true what they say—*Befehl ist befehl*.

"Shall I confess something else to you? I had made up my mind to give myself up to the Poles. But then

I thought to myself: they wouldn't throw me in jail, they're not that stupid, they'd send me into a laboratory and I'd serve my term there. But another trial was held in the meantime, again in connection with Auschwitz, and those crooks let the cat out of the bag: they dumped all those *tons* of ashes into my lap, you understand? They did it only to save their own worthless skins, the bastards! When the Poles heard of so many people put to death, they changed my sentence *in absentia* to death. Over there they hang condemned men with a piece of rope. A noose round your neck. It might last three minutes, but it might go on for fifteen . . . To your health!

"I'm telling you, they've been tailing me ever since, lurking around, hunting me down, hungry for my blood! Their cars roll down on me, they hurl flower-pots at me, they skulk around my room at night . . . In a word, I'm sure they're watching me now, from somewhere . . . I can sense it with my skin! I'm always in a state . . . To your health!"

Avakoum nodded, but he didn't drink. He waited.

"A physicist like me, frankly speaking, is welcome anywhere. I started searching for a place, for a country where the hands of those men could never get at me. Well, to cut the story short, I was made an offer. You know about that, of course, as it's your job to act as my bodyguard and I've just had proof of what a good job you're doing. Wonderful! Just a little longer, just one more night and half a day!"

Avakoum refilled his own glass and drank.

"It's strangel" he said. "The ship was due to arrive today!"

"How do you know it hasn't already arrived?" Schellenberg gave him a superior look. "You can be

sure she won't announce her entry into port with gun salutes . . ."

"Let's go to the pier then . . ." Avakoum offered. "If the ship's already there, we'll be certain to spot it. You'll go aboard and I'll return to the 'Gibraltar' to pick up your luggage."

"That's a reasonable suggestion," Schellenberg said. "And I'd have followed it up at once had I known . . ." He joined his hands and shook his head. "I don't even know the name of the ship which is to take me away from here!" He was silent. "Don't you know more about it?"

Avakoum shrugged his shoulders. "My assignment is limited," he said. "I've been instructed to guard you until you leave—that's all."

"What a pity!" Schellenberg sighed. He was sucking the last bone of the second squab when he heaved another sigh. "You must sleep outside my room tonight! Those people will take no chances."

The persecution mania had left its deep marks on Schellenberg. The man's nerves were shattered by an insane fear.

Avakoum said: "Unfortunately I can't do that. It's neither advisable nor profitable. I might doze off for a minute and they would do me in. They don't select their means, you know. Didn't you see how easily they could have run you over?"

"Blast them!" Schellenberg swore. "When I lived in Munich I had devised a small contrivance—if somebody approached my door, an alarm would start off so loud as to wake the dead! But in this city I'm as helpless as a babe. Have another squab?"

Avakoum declined.

"So you're washing your hands of me on the very last night in this place?"

"On the contrary . . ." Avakoum smiled. "Tonight you'll take my air-conditioned room at the El Minzah. That way, we'll score three points: you'll sleep in a bed of red mahogany, you'll save your head and tomorrow I'll cash the cheque for my fee at the Banque du Maroc and leave for Paris."

Schellenberg thought it over for some time, then he said: "I think I will have another squab. As for your suggestion, I've nothing against it. Go ahead and do as you like. Go, go! Pick up my lugggae. Meanwhile I'll enjoy some more of this delicious *squab a la Marocaine*."

During the night, Avakoum ripped Schellenberg's photo out of his passport and pasted his own in its place. He looked for the proper characters among the type faces he had brought with him, and soon had formed half of the stamp which was to fit in on the lower right-hand corner of the photo.

A micro transmitter was fitted into his transistor radio, and he used the soft metallic sides of his valise as an antenna. He despatched the following message to the Sofia Centre: "Request information about Professor Schellenberg of Munich." This done, he began packing up.

The professor was fast asleep in the mahogany bed. Avakoum had dissolved an eighth part of a tablet which, if taken whole, would induce a deep sleep lasting forty-eight hours.

Avakoum did not let go of his transistor radio even in bed. In addition to the micro transmitter, the transistor radio contained a micro camera and an

infra-red "eye" for close observation at night. The "eye" could be fitted into the camera if necessary.

Avakoum's "special" equipment included: first, "Adelphan Esidrex", a medicine against high blood pressure in two vials, a red one and a yellow one. The bottom four tablets in the red bottle, looking like the rest of them, could bring about a forty-eight-hour sleep; the bottom two pills in the yellow vial were for developing the micro film. Second, a crystal controlling the frequencies on which Avakoum got in touch with his Centre. That crystal, much smaller in size than a domino, was fitted into the right-hand lock of his valise. Avakoum had to turn the key twice in reverse to unscrew the capsule of the lock itself. Third, a memo book with checkered sheets, a small but strong magnifying glass and a pocket edition of the French symbolist poets. Verlaine and Rimbaud contained the keys with which Avakoum drew up his radio messages and deciphered the ones he received.

That was his "special" equipment. When he was all packed, he phoned for a taxi and asked the driver to take him to the Soco Chico, giving him the name of a street in the old medina. When they got there, he instructed the driver to wait and climbed out of the car, disappearing into the darkness. It was so easy to vanish into thin air in this maze of cobbled lanes and tortuous alleys.

He returned to the El Minzah after midnight. Schellenberg, who at one time had invented a device at Auschwitz to turn men into handfuls of ashes, slept the undisturbed sleep of the just.

At about two a.m. Avakoum contacted Sofia and wrote down the information about the professor,

sent over from Munich. It took him half an hour to decode the message. The darkness had begun to disperse and day was breaking over the Mediterranean when he switched off the lights. He closed his eyes as he leaned back against the armchair.

TANGIER, July 26, 196—

Schellenberg started his breakfast with a glass of orange juice and then fell upon the ham and eggs with tomatoes, onions and cucumber, proceeding to a half litre of cream and half a jarful of marmalade. After this light *dejeuner a l'Europeene*, he told Avakoum he was feeling in fine form and that he would not mind taking a stroll along the pier or to hell, for that matter, as long as there was a place nearby where they could have some mackerel and a glass of cold beer.

"Yet there's no beer like ours in Munich anywhere in the world!" Schellenberg sighed, sadly shaking his head.

They strolled along the shore for a while and then headed for the pier. Scores of big and small craft, passenger and cargo ships, tankers and barges, rested at anchor within the big horseshoe of the bay, between the walls of the breakwater. A wide variety of flags fluttered in the light breeze and the strong odour of salt water, iodine, seaweeds and grease hung heavy in the air. Wheelbarrows creaked by on the quayside. Arab and Berber porters tottered along, gasping and streaming with sweat. The cranes, prehistoric creatures, with glass cabins and commanding desks in between their ribs, thrust their trunks into the dark holes of the ships' holds.

The din was ear-splitting and the smells were all-

pervading. Greasy stains like grimy rags floated on the water. And over all this, a blue sky.

"I wonder which one is my ship!"

Avakoum shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll bet you two beers that she's already cast anchor somewhere around and that they're waiting for me, the devil take it!"

He turned round to light his cigar as his eyes ran over the vessels again.

"Do you know what flag she's flying?" Avakoum asked.

Schellenberg regarded him with irony.

"What difference does the flag make?" he laughed. "But since you ask, I'll tell you: my ship's flying the flag of the *Atlantic*. Are you pleased?"

"Very! That's all I need to know."

"Of course! Only one person, two at the most, should know certain things at certain times. Ordinary people must not know everything. If the average fellow knew everything, he might think he was a god! You understand? A world of several billion gods! Then I ask you: who is going to push these wheelbarrows? Who is going to collect the garbage? Gods don't push wheelbarrows and they don't collect the garbage! There would be rotting garbage and idle wheelbarrows all over the place! Then the gods would come down with disease and starvation. That is why the ordinary man must not know too much, he must not know everything! It would have been a calamity if he did! A scourge to the world. God damn it to hell!"

"We were talking about the ship . . ." Avakoum said. He was thinking: If I pushed him over into the sea there would be one more stain, a great, slimy

stain floating on the water. He also thought: What is it to a man like him to transform human beings into so many handfuls of ashes? And then, all of a sudden, he was struck by the idea: What if that ray fell into the hands of a man like him? What if Paul Schellenberg and Konstantin Trofimov were on the same ship, in 07's power? What was their aim? Perhaps they hoped the physicist Schellenberg might learn something from the physicist Trofimov?

The sun was scorching.

Schellenberg touched his shoulder. "I need a drink."

"By all means."

Schellenberg looked at his watch.

"It's ten-thirty now. In two hours I'll meet the man who'll take me aboard the ship. I think that might be the one over there. Can you see her?" Schellenberg pointed to the eastern side of the gulf. "That white one, looking like a yacht, with the two funnels! It must be her, I'm sure! The man will come along and he'll tell me: I'm at your service, Herr Professor . . . ! But why are we standing in the heat like two imbeciles?" He caught Avakoum by the arm in a familiar manner. "Come on."

Somehow their steps led them back again to the Rue de la Kasbah, to the tavern where they had had fried squab the day before.

"Look around and see if somebody's tailing us!" Schellenberg urged.

Avakoum cast a look about and said the coast was clear.

"It's my lucky day today," Schellenberg laughed.

They again sat down at the same table under the cypress and ordered beer.

Schellenberg had wiped clean a plateful of mack-

erel, he had gulped down two steins of beer, but as he was reaching for the third, he gave a loud hic-cough and clutched his stomach with both hands.

"Something funny's going on here . . ." he said with a worried frown. He kept quiet for some time, then he shook his head.

"I believe I had one too many. I don't feel well at all."

When he felt the beer spurt from his stomach and up into his throat, along with the mackerel, he scrambled to his feet and rushed to the toilet. When he returned, he looked very downcast.

The same thing happened again a few minutes later, then again and again. It was close to twelve noon.

"My God!" Schellenberg groaned. "Help me, please!"

His forehead was wet with perspiration, his hands shook badly.

"I know some people across the Soco Chico," Avakoum said. "The old fellow collects herbs and I'm sure he can do something to stop this business at once. Stand up, let's get going while there's still time!"

But Schellenberg had already lost track of time.

Avakoum called a taxi and helped the professor into the back seat, himself sitting next to the driver. He told him to drive to the old medina.

They reached the street Avakoum had visited during the night.

He told the driver when to stop, paid him and dismissed him.

Schellenberg was hiccoughing again as he shuffled along at Avakoum's side. The retching had stopped;

but the hiccoughs were as violent as explosions.

"Have some more patience!" Avakoum advised him. "I'll have you all right in a jiffy."

They crossed some alleys, it seemed to Schellenberg they were wandering in a fantastic never-never land, ridden with poverty and chaos! He found himself being led into a cemetery, where the poorest of the poor were buried. Here the graves were like trunks, their edges girdled in rusty iron bands.

Later, as he was being ushered into such a trunk, a white shadow flitted by like an apparition. Maybe it was the spirit of the dead. Frankly, by now, Schellenberg couldn't have cared less.

He was helped into a chair and a glass of water was raised to his lips.

He felt better. He was sitting in a small white-washed room with a window like a matchbox. He believed they were now going to give him some herbs which would put an end to his misery.

"Do you feel any better?"

The voice came to him from a great distance, but he was glad to hear it. His bodyguard stood by him, he need not fear anything.

He whispered he now felt a lot better.

"You'll be in excellent shape in an hour!" Avakoum said.

He was laughing, that was splendid.

"I'll be in excellent shape . . ." Schellenberg echoed feebly.

The tablet Avakoum had slipped into the first stein of beer was already losing its effect. It caused spasms only for about an hour. Then the sickness passed as if it had never been. The person's legs

would only tremble with weakness for another hour or so.

"Sir . . ." Avakoum said, ". . . allow me to remind you that you have a very important appointment in fifteen minutes. Time is growing short!"

Dumbfounded, Schellenberg stared at him.

"God damn it to hell!" he cried out. "Of course! Of course!" He rose to his feet, took a step towards the door, and reeled to one side. Avakoum helped him sit down on the couch again.

"My God!" Schellenberg moaned. "What am I going to do?"

"Now I'll lose my fee through your damned gluttony, that's what!" Avakoum hissed at him.

Nevertheless, something had to be done. Avakoum said: "We don't have much time. If you fail to show up at the meeting place, they will think you've given up the voyage and will go on without you. You'll lose your last chance. Maybe you'll lose your head, too, because I'll be gone in an hour and a half: my assignment is up at noon today and I'm going back to Paris. You'll stay behind in this city *alone*."

He was silent for a minute before he continued: "I can do you one last favour—I'll ask your contact to wait for you. It will cost him nothing to wait for you one hour."

"You know . . ." Schellenberg's face lit up, ". . . I think that's a good idea! You're very intelligent, you know! Go as fast as you can to the Mendoubia, to the dragon tree, the oldest tree there, everybody knows it, you can't miss it. There will be a man, with a newspaper in his left hand, standing next to the tree. You'll ask him: 'Sir, would you be kind enough to show me the way to Cape Spartel?' If he tells you:

'I do not know the way to Spartel but I can show the road to the Phoenician cemetery,' everything will be all right. You'll just hire a taxi and bring him over here."

"I'll go right away," Avakoum said.

"Remember, you ask him the way to Spartel and wait for him to mention the Phoenician cemetery," Schellenberg repeated.

"I have it!"

Just then a man in a white robe entered the room. He held a glass of water in his left hand. The water in the glass seemed quite clear. The man put his right hand to his forehead, then it travelled down to his lips and his heart and he reverently bowed his head. He uttered a few words in Arabic and turned to Avakoum. Avakoum translated for the professor.

"He says that if you drink the water in the glass you'll feel better than at any time in your life."

Schellenberg grabbed the glass, emptying it in one gulp. Then he wiped his meaty lips.

"Don't forget my luggage!" he called after Avakoum as he sank back on the couch. "Or my passport!" He did not speak for some time and then said, smiling contentedly, "You know, I feel as if my body were losing a kilogram every second! That must have been a magic potion you gave me . . . ! But what are you waiting for? Run, the devil take you, run!" He rubbed his forehead with his hand. "You will be too late." He said the last words in a very low voice, almost in a whisper.

When they were out in the corridor, Avakoum told the man in the white robe: "He'll fall asleep in a few minutes. Cover him up with a sheet and don't

worry. He'll be sound asleep for a day and a half. I'll call on you tonight, or tomorrow at noon, at the latest."

Avakoum did not go back to the old medina either in the evening or on the next day. He never again stepped over the threshold of the little clay cottage where Schellenberg had fallen so fast asleep. Things took an entirely different turn and not at all in the direction Avakoum had planned.

If Avakoum had not come upon "Hans'" address in the West German Consulate, he would have sought other ways and means of locating him. If his trick of saving Hans from being run over hadn't gained him the German's confidence, he would have had to resort to another stratagem. He had been lucky.

So far everything had run smoothly—Avakoum had been working his plan out step by step. Two more moves would win the game for him: first, to get into 07's ship—he would be taken aboard by Schellenberg's contact. Second, as soon as he ascertained that Trofimov and Natalia Nikolaevna were on board—he would have to go ashore and inform the local authorities, so that the captives were set free at once. The release was more a procedural, administrative matter. Even if the Moroccan authorities turned a deaf ear to the release of the prisoners, or refused to do anything about it, the Soviet Union and the entire world would know where they were being held and *by whom!*

There was no force in the world strong enough to thwart Avakoum's purpose.

So far, everything had run according to schedule. Two more moves and things would be happily resolved.

But right then the enemy shifted the pawns unexpectedly and the last portion of Avakoum's carefully developed structure crashed down around his ears.

Here was the Mendoubia Garden, shady and cool, its luxuriant flowers conjuring up a vision of Eden, its age-old trees thrusting their gnarled bodies up into the air and screening the sky like giant green umbrellas. The palm of a hand, raised high, fragrant, mottled with light and shadow, a-twitter with the songs of nightingales and picturesque with its old cannons. The Mendoubia was famous for the dragon tree—eight hundred years old, its trunk like a keg from the wine cellar of the Cyclops, its leafy crown, a small forest, scraping the sky.

Antaeus—the founder of Tangier, once reposed under such trees. In the remotest times of antiquity when one-eyed Cyclops walked the earth, Hercules wandered about in these parts with a huge club on his shoulder in search of adventure. Perhaps the great grandfather of the dragon tree, the pride of the Mendoubia, cast its shadow over Hercules. Perhaps.

But at that sultry afternoon hour, under the gorgeous crown of the dragon tree stood a man in a white panama hat, dark-skinned and big-faced, with the shoulders of a heavyweight wrestler. He wore a white tunic with glinting copper buttons—a sort of sailor's uniform. There was an expression of boredom on his heavy slab-like face. In his left hand he held a newspaper.

Avakoum walked up to him, and asked him in French: "Sir, would you be kind enough to show me the way to Cape Spartel?"

The man regarded him sullenly, from top to toe.

He answered: "I do not know the way to Cape Spartel, but I can show you the road to the Phoenician cemetery!" His French was smooth and soft, rustling like silk.

Avakoum smiled at him. "I take it you come from the South of France."

"Corsica," the man corrected him. He went on in a very hurt tone of voice: "Don't you think it was very inconsiderate of you to have kept me waiting so long, being eyed by all sorts of characters? People must have had their suspicions of me."

"I'm sorry."

The man in the white tunic glared at him.

"Very well then." He made a curt gesture. "Keep to my right and don't move half a step away from me, do you hear?"

"I do, Monsieur."

They came out onto Rue de la Kasbah and a taxi stood waiting alongside the curb, across the road. They climbed in and when the taxi had started, the man asked:

"Which hotel are you staying at?"

Avakoum answered that he was staying at the El Minzah.

"Drive to the El Minzah!" the man ordered.

They pulled up in front of the hotel. The two of them went in.

"Get your luggage down . . ." the man said. "I'll be waiting in the lounge." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "I'll give you five minutes."

The blood surged in Avakoum's temples, hitting his eardrums like hammers, but he gained control of himself. He nodded.

The bellboy carried his valise out of the elevator and he went over to the desk to pay his bill. The man in the white tunic was waiting near the glass door.

"I'll keep the room for another two days . . ." Avakoum said in a very low voice.

"So you're not checking out . . ." the cashier nodded. "Very well, sir."

The first stroke of bad luck came as they were leaving the lounge. To make way for a blonde lady walking straight towards him, her eyes fixed on his face, Avakoum turned abruptly on his heel, his glance holding hers. She was beautiful.

The encounter was worthy of the marble of the El Minzah. But the transistor radio, flung over his shoulder with a long strap, wailed piteously—as Avakoum stepped aside it made a semi-circle in the air, striking hard against the marble pillar near the entrance. Avakoum's heart quivered as if pricked by a thorn. So little could knock out the radio transmitter! A pall of darkness descended and the El Minzah became a tomb.

"We're wasting time," the Corsican snapped.

They stepped out onto the street.

At the port a boat, painted black, with three oarsmen inside, was waiting for them. The oarsmen were wearing white and blue-striped sailor shirts.

The Corsican introduced himself. "I am Francois. The captain of the ship."

"Paul Schellenberg," Avakoum returned. "Professor of physics."

"Will you step into the boat, please!"

The sun was roasting and it seemed as if pieces of broken glass flashed in the drowsing water.

A few rhythmic strokes of the paddles and the boat swiftly moved to the right, away from the vessel anchored closest to them. Francois removed his panama hat and handed it to Avakoum with a lofty smile.

"Take my hat, Professor, put it on, but pull it down on your head so that it hides half of your face. You can feel how hot the sun is!"

Francois evidently meant: "Cover your eyes so that you won't see much!"

Avakoum took the hat.

The water softly swished around the sides of the boat.

Beneath the brim of the hat, Avakoum couldn't see.

They changed directions several times, to the left, to the right, to the left again, making circles and eights—maybe they were squeezing their way among other craft, or perhaps they were zigzagging on purpose to confuse him completely as to their direction.

Finally the oarsmen stopped rowing and somebody blew a whistle above them as the boat slipped into the shadow cast by the ship.

Avakoum took off the panama hat, threw it, and it landed in Francois' lap. He caught a glimpse of two surfaces—the black, vertical side of the ship towering above him and the blue expanse of the ocean melting away into the buttermilk of the horizon. They had circled the ship and were now in the extreme western tip of the gulf facing the open ocean.

Steel ropes were lowered from above, hooking up

the boat and hauling it up, smoothly and soundlessly, like an elevator.

A man wearing a white uniform and a white peaked cap stood on deck. He was scrawny and tall, with an aquiline nose, his blue eyes set deep in their sockets. Avakoum was reminded of an Andean condor.

"Robert Smith, First Mate . . ." He saluted, with no alacrity in his even, expressionless voice.

Avakoum nodded.

The flooring was made of shiny iron slabs. To the right and to the left, iron steps with iron parapets led somewhere above. Just opposite, three paces away, a wall gleamed white with a glittering bronze door-handle set into it.

"This way, please!" Smith said, pointing to the bronze door-handle.

Francois had disappeared somewhere. One of the oarsmen stood by, holding his valise. The man had straw-like hair and a trimmed beard, the colour of dry maize.

"This way, please!" Smith repeated.

Avakoum turned the door-handle and a heavy iron door opened slowly, as if under its own volition.

A narrow blue carpeted corridor stretched out before them. Frosted hemispheres shone on the ceiling.

"Allow me," said Smith, stepping in front of Avakoum and flinging open a door in a red frame that had a yellow glass window set into it. They passed along a tunnel with white smooth walls, then another blue carpeted corridor stretched before them. Yet another door set in a red frame with a yellow window, and behind it spread a big, rotunda-like room, its walls panelled in dark redwood. In it were a round table, easy-chairs with high backs, as well as deep

armchairs, all of them fastened to the floor. A cabinet ran along one of the walls of the room, with glass windows behind which the gilded lettering of a set of French encyclopedias glittered.

Robert Smith opened a door and the daylight smiled in—it was a bedroom with a porthole overlooking the sea, very modestly furnished: a low bed, a bedside table and a white-painted, wooden wardrobe. There was a small vaulted door which probably led into the bathroom.

"This is your apartment," Smith said. He turned to the straw-haired sailor carrying the valise. "Edmond, you may go now!"

"Yes, sir!" Edmond answered in a military manner.

They were left alone. Smith took out his pack of cigarettes, offering one to Avakoum.

"You could call this our *de-luxe* apartment."

He smiled and lost his vulture-like look.

Francois came in. Instead of the panama hat, he now wore a splendid white peaked cap, with two golden bands around it. The magnificent and imposing cap had changed the expression on his face as if by magic. The fierce look had gone, and the stern and calm eyes of an experienced seafarer looked out from under the visor of his cap.

He took a sheet out of his side pocket and said:

"Professor Schellenberg, be kind enough to fill out this form. It's your registration card, so to speak."

Avakoum's eyes skimmed over the sheet Francois handed him.

Name—Christian, surname. Names of father, mother. Residence—town, street, number. Profession—place of practice. If not currently in practice, since

when and why. Finally, birth date—day, month, year.

He gave a small sigh of relief. He had got all the information the night before from the Centre. 07 knew what he was doing. He was going to compare the data he had on the professor with Avakoum's answers, or he might even check on them with his centre over the radio.

Avakoum had no difficulty in answering the questions.

"Here it is . . ." Avakoum said, handing Francois the completed questionnaire.

The two went out of the room, leaving Avakoum alone.

He knew he was trapped and realised he had voluntarily let himself fall into a snare: that door, the iron one leading into the open, out onto the deck, had no handle on the inside. It was opened with some sort of electromagnetic device. The port-hole overlooking the ocean was so small that he couldn't even have squeezed his shoulders through.

He was a captive, a captive! But 07 had let a deadly enemy onto his ship.

Tomorrow at noon, or in the afternoon, the real Schellenberg would wake up. It would not take him more than five minutes to realise he had been tricked by his "bodyguard". Even if he never thought that he might have been substituted on the ship, he would immediately notify his sponsors what had happened. Then a radio message to 07 would put an end to everything.

There was only one way out—to get in touch with the Sofia Centre. But how? There might be some direction-finding equipment aboard the ship! They would intercept his message at once and uncover

him! Then 07 would shoot him dead or throw him overboard to the fish—it would make no difference.

If only his radio transmitter still functioned. But that seemed absurd after it had struck against the marble pillar of the El Minzah. All this had happened because of that blonde who did not take her eyes off his face.

He had never had luck with such women.

No way out. What then? He would have to act within his blind alley, take things as they came, minute by minute, hour by hour. He decided to smoke a pipe.

He leaned back against one of the deep armchairs, stretched his legs and began to fill his pipe slowly. He took out his matches.

Just as he raised the flame to the bowl of his pipe, there was a loud knock on his door. The clear ringing laughter of a woman drifted in through the open window. It came from upstairs. He knew the voice—Natalia Nikolaevna's. She was laughing gaily.

The door opened.

07 stood there.

Mickey, the Angora kitten, white and fluffy, with two rubies for eyes, tossed a wad of paper about, leaping through the air and pouncing on it. It was very amusing and Natalia Nikolaevna laughed heartily.

But the cat held her eyes only for a minute or two, and he bounced out of her sight, together with her laughter. Her eyes rested on him, but did not see him.

Who said that thoughts flew as fast as birds? What were birds, after all? They swarmed over the Spartel

lighthouse, over its stone tower, but which one of them could spread its wings and hover over Leningrad's Admiralty Needle in a flash? Her eyes ran over the white flat-roofed buildings of this southern city and over the rectangles of concrete, but suddenly she was seeing the Neva waterside avenue, the Nevsky Prospekt, Peter the First mounted on his horse, its front legs raised and just about to gallop away. Who could stop it?

Thoughts flew much faster than birds. However, they were alike in one thing: they flocked together and scattered away wherever they pleased, only to flock together again.

Konstantin Troffimov did not wish to go up on deck. He said he was not interested in the city, that he did not care for Spartel, a lighthouse like any other. He was in a bad mood, silently smoking one cigarette after another. He did not talk even to her.

Everything had suddenly changed and now it all seemed like a dream. She had tried hard to believe that it was no dream and had almost succeeded. She would have absolutely believed it was not a dream had it not been for Konstantin Troffimov's sad smile or the sombre expression on his face. What more did he want to be absolutely convinced?

But perhaps he was right to doubt.

Interlude

That night, the night they were taken from the villa, she had been dreaming. In her dream she heard a Russian song and it was beautiful—as if she sat in a sun-spun swing, a light breeze blowing about her, the birch trees rustling. Then a very warm voice

called her by name: Natalia Nikolaevna, Natalia Nikolaevna!

She opened her eyes. The voice came from the intercom, but the intercom was not the same. She propped herself up on her elbow—the room was not the same, either. She had never before seen this room, or stepped into it. The window was round like a porthole, the walls were white and a globe hung from the ceiling. It was like a nightmare and she thought she was going mad. She clutched her throat and gave a loud sob.

For a few seconds, perhaps, she stood on the brink of insanity and then the caressing voice sounded again, speaking to her in her mother tongue.

"Please be calm, Natalia Nikolaevna! Nothing terrible has happened, you're in no danger!" The voice was familiar! She felt she had spoken with this man before sometime.

Then the voice over the intercom said that she and the distinguished Professor Troffimov were among friends, aboard a ship under his command and that he was acting on behalf of the Soviet Government:

"During the fete at the Sea Casino I secretly put some sleeping powder in your wine and in the professor's so that when you went to bed you would fall sound asleep. Then we transferred you to this ship."

The voice said that that had been done on the Soviet Government's orders so that Professor Troffimov might be safe and away from the eyes of Western intelligence agents.

"The Soviet Government has certain information that NATO is in possession of top secret details concerning Professor Troffimov's forthcoming tests. For this reason the Soviet Government has decided that

the tests should not be held in the North but some place else."

The voice went on to say that to ensure maximum security, it became imperative that the professor disappear. "You are now on a ship that flies a foreign flag. When we put to sea, you will be informed of your destination."

There was a pause.

"Now, my dear, please get dressed. Your things are in the closet. In half an hour we'll have breakfast together."

The intercom went dead.

It was all as perplexing and strange as a fairy tale.

She was still lying in bed, clad only in summer pyjamas, very special ones at that—with shorts. Whoever he was, acquaintance or stranger, she couldn't receive him looking like this. She must get dressed. After all, she was Professor Troffimov's secretary, working on her Ph.D. on quantum electronics, she was a Leningrad girl, and . . .

She jumped out of bed but reeled. She felt so weak! She could hardly stand on her feet! How long had she been like this? Since last night? But last night she had felt fine, she had danced at the Sea Casino, she had danced . . .

She suddenly pressed her hand to her breast. Was it possible? That voice? That man . . . ?

The world was topsy-turvy, whirling around and around . . .

Of course not!

She wanted to peep through the porthole but she walked over to the mirror instead. There were shadows under her eyes and the pallor of her face was frightening!

Then she looked out through the porthole and gave a sigh. But how did they get us here without us feeling a thing? she thought. She felt the blood rush to her face. So they had picked her up from her bed as she had slept, just like that! The shame of it! They had chloroformed her. What kind of State Security men were they, anyway?

She opened the vault-like small door to the bathroom and the shiny nickel, the crystal mirror and the gleaming bathtub somewhat restored her feeling that there was still some semblance of order left in the world.

She put on her own clothes, although she found a very nice raspberry-coloured sweater and a dark blue skirt in the closet. They fitted her perfectly and were made of genuine wool. What did they think? That she would put on things not belonging to her? She had her own. But her eyes rested longingly on the sweater that was the colour of ripe raspberries.

She was surprised, though not too much, to see Rene Lefevre enter her cabin.

"I recognised your voice," she said. But she did not extend her hand to him.

"Good morning, dear Natalia!" Rene smiled at her. "I'm very glad to see you're in good health."

She shrugged, saying nothing.

"Shall we have breakfast?" he asked. He wore a blue shirt with short sleeves and a pair of blue pants. He was handsome. His arms were strong and muscular.

"I don't know who you are or what you are!" Natalia said, trying to look calm. "Where is Professor Trofimov?"

"He is expecting you." Rene made a short bow. "Come."

They passed along the tunnel-like corridor and went into a small lounge. A cut-glass chandelier threw a strong light from the ceiling.

Troffimov embraced Natalia like a father, kissing her on both cheeks. He looked grey as if recovering from a grave illness.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Natalia shook her head, her eyes filling with tears.

He patted her shoulder lightly and motioned her to sit down next to him.

They started breakfast in silence. Rene served Natalia. When everything had been brought in, he began to speak in a low voice. His Russian was faultless.

"I think the time has come for us to clarify our relations. You must understand that I'm merely carrying out orders and nothing more. I'm a Soviet citizen working abroad and I've been ordered to take you, Professor, somewhere far south where you'll be able to work in secret away from the prying eyes of NATO operatives."

"May I know what place?" Troffimov asked in a cold and dry voice.

O7 lifted his shoulders.

"I'd tell you if I knew!" he said. "I'd gladly satisfy your curiosity. We will be told the exact location when we get far south, very far south."

"What exactly do you mean by 'far south'?" Troffimov asked.

"Somewhere south of the fortieth parallel," O7 answered.

"Equipment?" Troffimov asked.

Natalia Nikolaevna smiled sadly.

07 deeply inhaled the smoke from his cigarette, his eyebrows knitting.

"You will have whatever you need for your tests when the time comes. You will also have an assistant—a French professor, whose views are, shall we say, sympathetic. On the way to our destination, we shall stop to pick up both the equipment and the man."

The professor sipped his tea then put the cup to one side.

07 said, "Please remember that here I represent the company owning this ship and that my name is Gaston Dex."

"What is your Russian name?" the professor asked.

"Vadim Sergeev."

"Vadim Sergeev . . ." the professor began, ". . . or whatever your name is, it doesn't matter in fact! I do not believe you and don't have any illusions that I'll ever believe you. You have kidnapped us like gangsters. The Soviet Government would never have condoned such an action toward an honest person and a lady!"

07 smiled. "You are very naive. A brilliant scientist, yes, but naive." His voice rose. "Don't you realise, it's your discovery that is at stake in this particular case!"

"If it was necessary to protect my discovery . . ." the professor went on tersely, ". . . and to alter the location of the forthcoming tests, the Soviet Government would have found another way of informing me and of discussing the question with me!" The professor's thin bony face had grown pale with excitement.

07 shrugged.

"I'm sorry . . ." he said. "I'm very sorry, but I'm in no position to make any comments."

"You'll let me go ashore at the first port where there's a Soviet consull" the professor said.

"I've been ordered not to let you go ashore anywhere!" 07 replied icily.

"I am a prisoner?"

"If you wish to put it that way."

"This is terrible!" Natalia Nikolaevna whispered.

"I have my instructions," 07 said. He turned to the professor, "Nevertheless, if you wish, I'll get in touch with Moscow and transmit your request for personal contact with a Soviet official."

He rose, made a courteous bow, and started for the door.

"One minute, Sergeev," the professor called him back.

07 stopped and turned back to face them.

Troffimov went on. "There should be no third party between Moscow and myself. Such a man couldn't really be trusted."

07 sighed. "I'm sorry!"

Troffimov rose.

"I myself wish to speak with Moscow!" he said. "Not with your people but with *mine*! Do you understand? I have a direct connection with my scientific centre."

07 thought it over for some time.

"You wish to transmit a coded message to your centre?"

"Of course."

"Do you have a code, a set hour for transmissions and a key to decipher the messages?"

The professor looked at Natalia.

"Every Wednesday, at thirteen hours Moscow time!" Natalia rose. "It's my job, citizen Sergeev!"

07 said that since it was Wednesday he would be pleased to take Natalia Nikolaevna to the ship's radio room so that she could get in touch with Moscow personally. That would be at 12 o'clock, when it would be thirteen hours Moscow time.

At twelve sharp, by the ship's clock, Natalia Nikolaevna transmitted the following into the ether:

"The professor and I are on an unidentified vessel in the Mediterranean, sailing to an unknown destination. Request confirmation and credentials of Vadim Sergeev who tells us he is acting with your knowledge and on instructions of the Soviet Government."

Half an hour later the coded answer from Moscow came through: "Troffimov and Nikolaevna, have complete trust in Sergeev."

07 entered the ship's radio transmitter room a few minutes later.

"Well, what did they say? Did they tell you I was a kidnapper and a gangster?"

Natalia put the decoded message in her purse. She nodded. "They confirm your credentials."

07 reminded her that for a certain time, a couple of days perhaps, she and the professor would have to keep to their cabins and not go up on deck. It was in the interests of their mission.

When she rejoined Troffimov, she told him in answer to his unspoken question, "He is genuine."

Troffimov noisily exhaled his breath.

Natalia went on: "I heard it with my own ears, I read the message with my own eyes and I decoded it with my own hands! There's been no deception."

She began to weep tears of relief.

But for some reason, Trofimov did not rejoice in the news. The moment he heard Lefevre had spoken the truth, his face fell, his shoulders slumped—he looked like a man stricken with a fatal disease.

He shut himself in, hardly uttering a word and ate only to keep alive.

When they reached Tangier, the ship cast anchor at the entry of the gulf, away from the other vessels. 07 went ashore and when he returned, he brought Natalia Nikolaevna a gift of some candied fruit, a silk Arab shawl and a silky Angora cat.

Natalia Nikolaevna accepted the gifts so as not to hurt his feelings.

As he was in a fine and sentimental mood, 07 let her come out on deck for an hour or so.

Later in the day

07 stood in the doorway.

Avakoum sensed his eyes leaping toward him like two leopards. He went on filling his pipe. Steady, steady, he exhorted himself. It was unlikely 07 would see through the disguise.

"Paul Schellenberg?"

"That's right."

07 closed the door. He walked up to him and slowly extended his hand. Avakoum extended his even more slowly.

"Sit down!"

Avakoum lit his pipe.

"You're fifty years old if my information's correct . . ." 07 said.

"And a couple of months into the bargain!" Avakoum added.

"You look older."

"I've had a hard, dispiriting time of it over the years."

"Of course."

Avakoum asked: "Who are you?" He stared unblinkingly at 07.

The Englishman was not easily shaken, but he felt cold fingers run down his back.

"I am . . ." he began, as he shifted his glance, ". . . the only person aboard the ship who knows why you've joined us, who's sent you and what your mission is . . ."

"Your name?" Avakoum asked.

"Call me Gaston Dex."

"I see."

For a few seconds they both stared at each other, eye to eye. Then Avakoum felt a tremor beneath his feet, as if the cabin floor was rocking. An invisible fly softly buzzed in the air. The propeller was working.

07 grinned broadly.

"We're already on our way," he observed.

"The devil take it!" Avakoum was surprised. It looked as if he was trapped, that he wouldn't be able to leave this ship after all and report his find to the local authorities. Damn.

They both fell silent. The fly in the air buzzed louder and louder. The walls were vibrating.

07 rose.

"When are you going to introduce me to the Russian professor?" Avakoum asked.

"There's plenty of time," the Englishman answered, adding in the doorway: "Don't be in any hurry!"

Avakoum lifted his shoulders. "Please yourself."

He made a step towards 07. "I'll come out with

you," he said. "I don't like being shut up in this box of a cabin!"

"I'm sorry." 07 smiled coldly.

"What's the matter?"

"You'll be so kind as to stay here and not venture out!" 07 said. "Our common interests demand it."

"God damn it to hell!" Avakoum was indignant in the Schellenberg manner. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Right then he was thinking whether he should seize his enemy by the neck, overpower him, then dash out and jump overboard. He'd swim toward the shore before he was picked up by a boat. At that instant, however, he realised all was hopeless: either the iron door would be locked or they would shoot him dead before he had time to jump over the side.

"You have this whole suite all to yourself," 07 remarked. "Please be patient. Just for a short period. Believe me, it's necessary."

Avakoum stuffed his hands in his pockets because he was afraid they might do something of their own volition. His anger was simulated. "I don't like your attitude, Dex. Remember, my collaboration with your people is purely voluntary. I could call off that collaboration any time I wish. I don't wish to remain locked up in this cabin."

"All right," 07 said placatingly. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You stay in the cabin and take a rest, while I transmit your request to the proper authorities." He bowed slightly, opened the door and went out.

The propeller worked on, a host of invisible flies buzzed in the air.

Avakoum stood before the porthole for more than an hour. The lighthouse of Cape Spartel vanished

and so did the steep rocky shore marked by caves; everything disappeared, everything but sky and water.

Spartel and the coastal strip melted away to the left, the sun slanted to the right of the steamship—they were travelling south.

He still knew approximately where they were. But in an hour or two the ship would sail in another direction, a new course would be set during the night and at dawn that course would be changed again—07 would be a fool not to cover his tracks. And how to get one's bearings in this blue wilderness with no sextant or compass to guide one?

If Avakoum was to get in touch with his own people, with his own Centre, he had better get to it while there was still time. Now he could still tell them: "We're in the ocean three hours south of Tangier." And that meant something. But tomorrow, the only information he could send into the ether would be: "We're somewhere in the North Atlantic," and that would amount to practically nothing.

Every minute counted.

He reached for his radio transmitter, hoping against hope it still functioned!

But it was no good.

Five minutes later he was lying on his bed, biting his lips in despair. The damned thing was out of order.

Swarms of invisible flies buzzed in the semi-dark cabin.

THE NORTH ATLANTIC, July 29, 196—

On the evening of July 28th, 07 contacted his Centre at the Belgian NATO headquarters for in-

structions as to how he should treat Schellenberg. Should he let him out of confinement or not when testing time came. Oscar Levi answered him curtly, even angrily. What confinement was he talking about, for God's sake? The professor's nerves were shaky enough without that. Or did he want to make him unfit for the job? He must always keep an eye on him, Schellenberg could talk with Trofimov occasionally, but he must seemingly enjoy complete freedom!

On July 29th, 07 told Avakoum to feel free to walk about the ship. They were out of the danger zone. But he hoped Herr Schellenberg would not take offence—there were two places aboard the ship which were "out of bounds" to all but 07, Captain Francois and Mr. Smith. One of the places was Trofimov's and his secretary's suites. He could see that an armed sentry was posted at the staircase leading to Trofimov's suite. Of course, he would introduce him to the Russian professor, but all conversation with the man would have to be avoided on board ship. Trofimov must go on believing that he was travelling incognito . . . As for the other place—that was the ship's radio transmitter room. Entrance was forbidden to all outsiders. Herr Schellenberg must be very careful not to stray into it by mistake if he didn't wish to be shot without warning.

Then 07 cautioned him that he was Schellenberg only to him, Francois and Smith. To the others, he was Jean Molinot, professor of physics of Nancy.

After having spent the last two days and nights in his cabin, shut up like a captive, Avakoūm, now Jean Molinot, came out on deck to smile at the world as a free man. As a comparatively free man.

The ocean beckoned to him, boundless and affectionate, waving its thousands of hands at him.

For a few moments he stood motionless, as he leaned against the low railing, gazing at the expanse, listening to the water which hissed and churned below his feet as the vessel cleaved through it. A dolphin shot up out of the depths some twenty feet away from the ship. Its shiny body speared through the air like a silvery rainbow and then it vanished just as quickly. A few baskets of snowy foam lingered on the place where the rainbow had been.

He did nothing more than give full play to his senses those first few minutes. The wind touched his face and roughed up his hair. He could have sworn he'd never before experienced anything like it. Then he caught sight of the dolphin again and smiled.

When he had quenched his thirst for air and after his eyes had had their fill of the blue expanse, he spotted the sparkling dots of the flying fish, gleaming over the wave crests like porcelain saucers. Rainbows momentarily rose and splintered away in the flying spray. As though somebody was scattering handfuls of precious stones over the water. The ocean was hailing him with the silvery rainbows of the dolphins and the brightly-coloured confetti of the flying fish.

The first few minutes had passed. The sun had slid up over the horizon and its rays were still slanting but already scorching. They invaded the decks from the ship's larboard. "Direction south-south-west," Avakoum reckoned. That was the first coherent thought that came to him.

Then the ship herself came under his scrutiny. It was a tanker, a small, fast vessel, weighing, he guessed, about three thousand tons.

The bridge rose in three levels over the stern. Here were the cabins, the navigation rooms, the quarters for the staff, everything. A flat space stretched out from that point to the bow—above which was a catwalk bound in iron, ten to twelve steps wide and about ninety steps long, bounded on both sides by an iron railing. The hull of the tanker and the reservoirs were below, submerged under water. The radar tower was above the prow, the radio mast stuck up high with the Canadian flag whipping in the wind.

The deck where Avakoum stood was on the first floor of the bridge. He climbed down some winding iron stairs to the catwalk which led to the ship's bow. The spray danced about and like a foamy tub, the water gurgled loudly, running backwards. The ocean breathed down on his neck, its greenish-blue, boundless bosom heaving as the sky raced overhead one minute and swooped down on him, like a movable glass roof, the next.

Avakoum heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Good morning."

It was Smith, the Mate, who seemed quite a good-natured fellow when he smiled. He was now smiling and Avakoum nodded to him.

"You shouldn't be looking down at the water!" Smith said. "You'll get dizzy. We're travelling at eighty miles an hour."

"You don't say!" Avakoum was surprised.

"That's right!"

"Most interesting."

They chatted for a while about the ship and the weather. Suddenly, out of the blue, Smith asked: "Do you play bridge?"

Avakoum answered that he played nothing but bridge in his spare time, but sometimes he tried his luck at poker and baccarat.

This seemed to please the Mate. "I think we'll hit off all right."

"I hope so!" Avakoum replied. "But we will need two more players."

"They're right here!" Smith informed him.

"You mean Francois?"

Smith shook his head. "No, there's Hans, the radio operator."

Avakoum pulled a long face. "I didn't expect to be closeted with the members of the crew during the voyage."

Smith scowled. "He's a very good player."

Avakoum knew he shouldn't make his protest too vehement. "Oh, very well then," he muttered ungraciously.

Smith's face blossomed out into a smile. "Sure, we'll get along fine together. How about now? There are still two more hours before lunch."

"Later," Avakoum replied. "This is the first time I've had some fresh air since we left Tangier! I haven't even had a look at the ship yet."

"There's not much to look at, anyway!" Smith said, nodding his head towards the bridge. "The officers' quarters and your own apartment are over there. Our guests' suites are above them; Mr. Dex's too. The Captain's bridge, the navigation room and the radio transmitter room are all the way at the top. That's about it! You'll get used to it soon enough."

Avakoum was thinking fast: "The guests were on the second floor of the bridge, close to 07. The deck

on that floor was hidden from view, which meant it faced the stern. Several portholes looked that way but they were closed and were high—very high . . .

Avakoum turned his back to the rushing wind to light a cigarette. He asked: "Are we getting close to the equator?"

The jovial Smith turned suddenly grave. "Our guests must remember two things," he began. "First—never to climb up to the captain's bridge, and second—never to ask questions about our route!"

Avakoum chuckled. "I never knew tankers had rules like that. No questions. I suppose it's because of the oil residue."

Smith nodded.

"Of course," Avakoum said. "Oil residue is highly inflammable stuff!"

The same day, two p.m.

A bird, most probably an albatross, circled around in the blue distance, to the left of the tanker. Avakoum shaded his eyes to look in that direction. As he stared, what looked like a high mountain peak rose skyward above the haze-enveloped horizon. The spectral peak hung in mid-air, between the blue dome of the sky and the blue ocean.

His eyes ached with gazing, but he kept staring hard. Then, spots, giant ink stains, came into sight, the ghostly peak towering over them. It no longer hung suspended, but stood firmly planted on the ocean's surface, on the ink stains.

It was now for the first time since he had come aboard that his heart leapt: everybody knew that at this latitude there was only one peak piercing the sky

—the peak of Teneriffe, on the island of Teneriffe!
Hail to the Canary Islands!
Now he had *something* to go on.

This something had to be made use of, it would serve as a point of orientation, at least for the time being.

A round electric clock over the entrance to the cabins showed that the time was now two p.m. Avakoum glanced at his own wrist watch—three p.m. He walked into the small lounge, picked up a volume of the Great Encyclopedia and began to look up the map of time zones.

His own watch went by G.M.T., while the ship's clock was set one hour west of the meridian. The line of that hour cut across the Canary Islands right in the middle.

He set his watch by the ship's clock. If the clock lagged behind in a day or two, that would mean the ship was sailing in a south-westerly direction, that she was bound for South America. Reversely—if the clock ran ahead one hour, it would mean the ship was steaming in a south-easterly direction, towards the Cape of Good Hope.

No matter how rough his orientation was, it would still tell him a lot, provided the navigator regularly moved the hands of the clock in accordance with the latitudes at which they sailed.

There was a weird hush over the ship. Not a voice to be heard, no laughter. The sentries posted at the entrance to the second floor stood motionless, as if petrified. When anybody moved about on an errand, he tiptoed, looking straight ahead, steeped in thought.

THE NORTH ATLANTIC, July 30, 196—

That morning, Smith appeared on deck clean-shaven, in a shining white uniform. He was wearing a new peaked cap.

"Birthday?" Avakoum asked him.

Smith looked at him in surprise, shaking his head.

"Mister Dex's orders. Tropical kit."

Avakoum guessed the steamship was crossing the Tropic of Cancer!

But how could he tell his own people that they were crossing the Tropic of Cancer and were one hour east of the Greenwich meridian? How?

Suddenly there was gay laughter just above him. It was Natalia Nikolaevna. But the laughter seemed to travel from far off, muffled by the walls of many rooms. It sounded hollow.

Suddenly, Smith pointed. "Look!"

Two little geysers swayed over the wave crests, two white rainbows with immense tails and flat snouts shimmered some hundred metres away to the left of the ship. Whales! They swam almost parallel to the tanker as if racing against it.

"Whales, all right," Smith said with importance. "On the move."

He spoke with self-assurance and again Natalia Nikolaevna laughed.

Avakoum experienced a tiny wrench in his innards. How could she laugh? How could she trust 07? How could 07 have turned the heads of these people? Those were questions weightier than the two whales swimming along and shooting geysers into the air . . .

How, how . . . ? He must somehow inform his own people that they were crossing the Tropic of Cancer,

following a course which would soon take them somewhere around Cape Verde Islands. Somehow . . .

"You look very glum," Smith observed.

"You robbed me of my money yesterday . . ."

"You may have better luck today!" Smith said soothingly.

The wind had dropped and the air was close. The sky was heaped high with hot ashes, the sun weighed down with grey mists.

Even the dolphins were lazy and not as playful as before. It was only the sparkling saucers of the flying fish that made the ocean smile.

The same day, in the afternoon

The other two bridge players were Hans, the radio operator, and Albert, the navigator. Both were Canadians. Hans' head was as round as a rugby ball and Albert's face struck Avakoum as a yellow melon. Hans was a chatterbox, Albert only nodded, and shook his head, very rarely saying more than "yes" or "no".

Avakoum played *partie fixe* with Hans against Smith and Albert. The day before, while playing auction bridge, Avakoum had made an unusually large number of defences, not only at rubber, but also at game level—and both he and Hans had lost a hundred dollars each. Hans was crushed while he was dummy, smoking one cigarette after another . . . Today the dollars had to be won back!

The Japanese, Syao, came in. He was 07's personal valet. Syao was short, immaculately clean and moved as stealthily as a cat. Like a shadow, fluttering first

here, then there. His face was completely devoid of expression. Syao stood before Avakoum.

"Sir . . ." he said. "Mr. Dex wishes to see you in his cabin."

"Very well!" Avakoum nodded, without taking his eyes off the cards.

Syao had not budged an inch.

"He means now," Smith said softly.

The three of them threw their cards on the table, rose at the same time and quickly went out.

What if the real Schellenberg has called from Paris? Avakoum trembled for a second.

Syao's face was blank.

Avakoum sighed. "Let's go!"

That evening he wrote the first entry in his diary—with a pen using a special invisible ink. Paul Schellenberg, Jean Molinot, Munich, Nancy—all of it was becoming a jumble. But he could talk with his diary frankly, as Avakoum, in his own name. The diary brought some order into the chaos and calmed him. It wrenched him free from the Schellenbergs and the Molinots, offering him a chance to think and evaluate.

July 30th, in the evening. We're crossing the Tropic of Cancer. The day was stuffy, humid and still, but now a strong wind is rising from north-east, the waves are washing over the catwalks. It is very rough sailing.

Schellenberg's still churning around in my mind. As I climbed up the stairs, with the Japanese following behind me, I thought to myself: "Why hadn't I put an end to Schellenberg? Another tablet in that glass of water would have finished

him off altogether. It would have been so much easier."

I thought: "If Schellenberg has let the cat out among the pigeons, the first thing I must do is kill 07. I will strangle him or bash his head in, but noiselessly, so as to live a few seconds longer. As long as I'd be able to shout before the straw-haired sentry shot me down: 'Troffimov and Nikolaevna, they're lying to you, you've been kidnapped, kidnapped!'"

But it was nothing like that.

"Herr Schellenberg," 07 began, "I've decided to introduce you to the Russian professor. What do you say?" I said: "I suppose that must happen some time or other."

He reminded me again that I was Jean Molinot of Nancy and a confirmed communist; that 07 was working for the Soviet Government, and that the steamship we were on was under orders from Moscow.

The straw-haired sailor held a Tommy-gun in his hands. When 07 passed by him, his body went rigid. The iron door opening into the suites of the guests was locked and guarded by an armed sentry.

07 produced a key and opened the door. My head reeled and my hands itched to grab him by the neck. But that would have been pointless. Absolutely.

Troffimov was in the lounge, leafing through a book. I thought he'd lost a good deal of weight. His eyes glittered as if he had a high fever.

"This is Professor Molinot," 07 announced in excellent Russian.

Troffimov gave me an indifferent look, shrugged,

and went on turning over the pages of the book.

Natalia Nikolaevna also entered the lounge. She had come in from the deck. 07 introduced me to her as well.

I had seen her several times in Varna. She was now a hundred, a thousand times more beautiful. She seemed so much fairer. I appreciated her womanliness more now because her shoulders were bare. Her blue eyes were bathed in a shimmering moistness.

Troffimov ignored me completely. Natalia was speaking with 07.

I might not have existed for them. What irony!

An invisible hand was guiding us through a Shakespearean comedy. It was both funny and sad.

I felt only sad. I still feel sad.

That went on for about twenty minutes. While 07 was dancing attendance on Natalia, he did not let me out of sight for a second.

August 3rd. We should be crossing the equator tomorrow, according to my calculations. It is cloudy outside and the world is locked between sky and water, and is enveloped in dense mists and warm vapours. Visibility is only half a mile at best. The waves are gentle, the ocean is altogether smooth and the north-easterly wind has dropped, or almost so. A blue solitude, sultry and stuffy.

I paced up and down the catwalk for a whole hour, from the bridge to the bow and back again. I looked at the waves and the ocean and mostly at the dolphins—our loyal fellow-passengers. Once I thought I had caught a glimpse of Natalia Nikolaevna's face behind the porthole on the second floor. Very likely I was wrong, because I had

glanced up quite by chance. Throughout my walk up and down the catwalk I watched the ocean and the dolphins. Who knows! She may have been watching me, thinking: "What kind of a professor is he, with nothing better to do than look at the dolphins and talk to himself . . ." It's a good thing I looked up . . .

Afternoon. Another bridge party with Smith and the others. They seemed somewhat pensive. I glanced at my cards and all of a sudden I caught myself wondering: "What has happened to the real Schellenberg? *The devil take it!*"

I had an ace of diamonds in my hand, but the little red figure was a porthole with Natalia Nikolaevna's blue eyes looking from behind the glass.

Then the alarm was raised!

Smith and the others threw down their cards and rushed out.

Nightfall. I ran into Smith at the entrance to the first floor, below the clock. He seemed upset. I asked him what the matter was. Or was it a secret? He said it was no secret, that all aboard the ship knew about it since Francois and the boatswain had been searching the cabins. They might look into mine, too. "Someone steal something?" I asked. Smith looked at me with condescension. "It's no theft . . ." he answered, "but a hidden radio transmitter, giving away our co-ordinates to another party. It's happened twice since we left Tangier," Smith croaked. "A spy!"

I became excited and the world went toppling! At that instant a strip of lightning flashed and the wave crests went crimson. There was a deafening rap of thunder. I bent closer to Smith and whis-

pered in his ear: "It must be the Poles, it's their doing, they're still on my tail."

It began to rain.

Evening. Francois and the boatswain did not search my apartment, and of course, I wasn't going to ask them in!

The rain had stopped but the ship kept heaving.

I went to the officers' lounge. There was a piano in there and I just felt like playing. At the entrance I nearly bumped in Syao, 07's Japanese manservant. As a matter of fact, I deliberately bumped into him so as to get my hand over that spot on his chest, to the left, where his immaculate uniform always bulged slightly. I knew Syao usually went to the officers' lounge at that hour to fetch a bottle of rum for the Commander.

"I'm sorry, Syao!" I apologised, as I felt a small hard case under my left palm. "This ship will heave us right out of this world!"

He slipped away from me like an eel and only when he had stepped away, did he say: "Not at all, sir, not at all!" The Japanese are an excruciatingly polite race.

I opened the lid of the piano. The lounge was empty. There was no one about. It had never been so deserted before.

I played the minuet from "Eine kleine Nachtmusik". Natalia Nikolaevna looked at me through the porthole. "What are you doing, Professor?" she asked. "I'm solving problems, Mademoiselle!" I replied. She left. I continued to play.

"Eine kleine Nachtmusik" evokes such a longing for joy! I had started the minuet over again when suddenly the light in the lounge went out.

I got out—it was pitch-dark everywhere. Only a tiny blue bulb flickered over the entrance, the night greedily drinking up its feeble light.

I ran to my suite, took off my shoes and using my flashlight, I picked the broken transistor radio out of my valise. I opened the radio, holding the camera with the infra-red eye in my hand. I could see everything but nobody could see me. I was the Invisible Man! Through the infra-red eye the world looked spectral, with only violet shadows hovering about. Well, what of it! I was about to descend into the nether-world.

I stole by the entrance to the first floor and tiptoed past the sentry. He did not see me as the darkness was impenetrable.

The clouds hung low and the air was close. I desperately hoped there would be no lightning. I was ready to give Neptune his due, but no lightning, please! Let him stay down there in the ocean depths!

The waves churned and hissed around the ship's sides. A greenish light flashed in the ocean. A strong wind rose. The sentry posted at the door gave a chesty sigh.

At last, Syao came out. He said something to the guard and went up the stairs to the second floor. I followed him, just a step behind.

We reached the landing. The same ceremony all over again: the man on duty recognising the voice and letting him through. We started for the iron stairs leading up to the captain's bridge.

I saw the steersman through the window of the navigation room, his eyes fixed on the compass, as he gripped the helm. The window of the navigation

room shone bright—the emergency lights were on in there. We passed another door—another man armed with a Tommy-gun stood in front of it. Syao called from a distance and the man called back. We turned into a narrow passageway, climbed down an iron ladder and finally stopped in front of a narrow, vault-like door. I stood there with my heart in my mouth, hardly breathing.

Syao took out a key, turned it once, thrust it forward, then turned it again. At that second I shot out my right hand and seized Syao by the throat, my fingers closing round it. We both stumbled into the room, behind the door, and without releasing my grip, I picked up the key and pushed the door shut. I felt for the lock on the inside and turned the key.

Wheezing, Syao's body hung limp in my arms. I laid him on the floor, the transistor radio swinging on my chest. I emptied his pockets. The contents of his pockets were: a small note-book, a radio crystal, a pencil and a transistor radio like a cigarette box. I looked at the note-book. In it were calling signals, dates and decoding keys.

Syao, do people ever know how their paths will cross?

While waiting for him to come to, I had a look around the cabin. It was like a small box. No windows. A table with a portable radio transmitter on it. An antenna and cables. A big blue lamp hanging on the wall, a circuit breaker with two switches.

Syao opened his eyes. He could not see me, but I saw animal terror contort his face. For some reason, I felt sorry for him.

"Syao!" I said. "Don't be afraid! I won't do you any harm!"

His horror gave way to amazement.

"This is Molinot."

A ghost of a smile played around his lips. "I know who you are," he said. "I mean, who you *really* are. You can't frighten me."

"Be that as it may," I said. "I've got you over a barrel. You see, I got you on some microfilm just as you were turning the key in that door. I've also photographed what I found in that little note-book. If Dex happens to come upon this film, he's sure to throw you overboard to the fish."

"Dex is as much Dex as you are Schellenberg!" Syao muttered hoarsely. "Or Molinot."

My heart sank and I swallowed with difficulty. I kneeled down by him and again clutched his neck. "Syao," I said, "I could strangle you this minute if I chose. We're both playing a game, but right at this minute I'm holding the trump card. I'm not going to strangle you or give you away, and you'll not give me away." I shook him roughly, as a terrier shakes a rat. "Now talk . . ."

Syao was beaten. He knew it. He began to talk. He had no choice. He told me how, when certain special equipment was fitted into this blank cabin, it could intercept the waves emitted by the ship's radio transmitter. It did not let them go into the ether but brought them back here, to the receiver of this small transmitter. Natalia Nikolaevna thought her dots and dashes were on their way to Moscow, while, in fact, they were bounced back to the receiver. 07 deciphered the message, then tapped out a reply. Natalia Nikolaevna thought it

was Moscow answering her. 07 used Troffimov's key—which he had photographed while “examining” his and Natalia's luggage.

The “deviation” of the waves emitted by the ship's big radio transmitter and their transference to the receiver of the small one was a very simple matter. The left switch of the circuit breaker was changed from top to bottom position. Whenever the switch was in the bottom position, the antenna of the big radio transmitter sent the waves back into the receiver of the small one . . . Ingenious and clever . . .

Unfortunately, I could not use the small radio transmitter as it operated only on micro-waves. It was so designed that its waves could reach a point between a hundred and a hundred and fifty miles at best, which, for my purposes, was nothing! I had a crystal controlling the frequencies to my Centre but the damned radio transmitter could neither receive it nor breathe any vestige of life into it!

Syao was about to transmit a message to a ship his sponsors were sailing on a parallel course some hundred miles away. Japanese Intelligence! Damn, everyone was coming in on this caper, which was taking on some of the aspects of a circus.

Any profit from this expedition in the infra-red?

The days and hours of 07's transmissions to his Centre, his code and decoding key.

I helped Syao to his feet and advised him to wear a scarf round his neck the following day. I patted him on the shoulder and asked him to walk ahead of me.

August 4th. Latitude 00°00'—course—south. We're crossing the equator. The sky is overcast, the wind south-westerly. The ship keeps rocking. The ship looks deserted. Only the sentries with their Tommy-guns stand at the entrances. The lights are turned off at night. Smith and the others are nowhere to be seen. It's lonely. I wander up and down the catwalk alone. No life stirs behind that porthole above me where I once caught a fleeting glimpse of Natalia Nikolaevna's beautiful face.

August 7th. It's cool and it's raining. The sky has closed in on the ocean and the ocean is pouring over the catwalk. When the sun is up the solitude is blue. Today the sky is grey, unsettled and rumbling. Syao has given me a present—a bottle of rum.

I'm badly worried. Where are we going?

August 9th. I've been thinking: What's my black-bird doing? And my friends. Of General N. My studies. I have just realised that I don't even know the name of this vessel.

August 10th. The ship's clock has run one hour ahead of my wrist watch. We're sailing east!

August 13th. The ship's clock has run another hour ahead of my watch. I am confused. We'll either circle round the Cape of Good Hope or rush straight to Capetown. I have to act! Another sortie with the infra-red camera.

Evening. I gave Smith and the others some rum in which I had dissolved a fourth part of one of my tablets.

We went on playing. Hans kept yawning and was the first to fall asleep.

It was ten-thirty. Everybody slept. In half an hour 07 would contact his Centre. The lights were out. Attention! The hour had not yet struck when I would be staking everything on my next step.

It was eleven. The empty cabin. The left switch of the circuit breaker was in the bottom position. I heard 07 speak: "I am two hundred miles out of Capetown. Shall we enter port?"

Ten minutes later I answered: "Forget Capetown! Keep to course 133° and don't contact me again till you reach Prince Edward Islands!"

I had calculated the course in advance with the aid of the map in the Great Encyclopedia.

Eleven-thirty. I woke up Smith and the others. They were sleepy and I put some caffeine in their glasses. They were feeling great in no time, even Albert mumbled something under his breath.

I was feeling fine myself.

Syao entered and informed Smith and Albert that the Commander wished to speak with them. Hans and I were left alone in the cabin. Hans winked at me and then he heaved a great sigh. I poured him some rum. Cheers, Hans!

August 10-17th. It's getting colder and colder. The sky is a leaden colour, even the wave crests look grey. I shiver in my summer clothes.

But I keep walking up and down the catwalk. My feet are wet, I shiver, but keep walking. I count the whales—round-headed and flat-headed, with and without geysers. The herds of whales are turning the ocean into a gigantic bowl heaped high with whipped cream.

I look at the snow settling on the grey water, thinking about the second floor porthole. Natalia

Nikolaevna's face has shown twice in the window. I keep thinking of her eyes. They're blue and gentle, as the ocean was before we hit the Tropic of Cancer.

Everything is grey and cold and fog-bound at this latitude. It often rains. The catwalk is slippery. It's hazardous walking on the iron slabs.

August 18th. It is snowing. Big wet snow flakes. We sail on, entangled in the threads of a boundless white net.

Smith brought me a woollen wind-breaker, a pair of deerskin trousers and winter shoes. Fat Hans gave me a coat lined with wolfskin.

Well . . . Molinot thanked them heartily, he was even moved. I was moved, too!

Will the time ever come when men will no longer lie in wait for each other?

It is snowing . . . A white blanket, spreading and shifting, with no end and no beginning.

August 18th. Noon. I learned from a conversation I overheard between Smith and Hans that we'd just left Prince Edward Islands behind.

There was to be another contact to be made tonight at eleven.

I looked up Antarctica on the map of the Encyclopedia, trying to locate the Soviet Polar station "Mirny."

Shall I succeed? Shall I be able to direct the ship to "Mirny"?

Evening, eleven-thirty. 07 asked: "How long do I follow course 133°?" I answered from the empty cabin: "Shift to course 115° at once! In a week I'll give you the co-ordinates of the spot where you are to anchor!"

August 19th. Smith was in an evil mood. He

brought in some rum and drank straight from the bottle, keeping a resentful silence.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You're not sick, are you?" He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. When the bottle was half-way gone, he spoke up, though obliquely and beating about the bush.

"A hell of a course to keep to! Everybody's blind-mad. . . . Make sure you don't run into Dex! I've been thinking . . . We'll hit the ice zone in a day or two! . . . This shell has never been near ice. . . . We'll hit the Polar nights and the blizzards. . . . The end of the world, the end of the whole damned world. Nobody knows what's going on! God Almighty! Can you imagine what those Polar nights and blizzards are like? . . . Ship's not up to it."

I asked him if he had a talisman. He unbuttoned his tunic to show me a medallion hanging by a silver chain. The Virgin was on one side and the picture of a young woman on the other.

"You'll live to be ninety!" I assured him.

He looked at me wistfully, wishing he could believe me.

August 20th. Cold and gloomy, the sun hanging limp over the horizon till about two p.m. and then it was snuffed out. A bleak, rayless sun.

Same evening. Some sort of commotion going on upstairs, on the third floor. I could hear feet running and voices shouting.

I wondered how Konstantin Troffimov felt.

I didn't dare think about Natalia Nikolaevna. If I did, the irrepressible desire to run out onto the catwalk and into the cold, piercing air would take hold of me. It was frightful out there.

Patience, patience! Another five days! I use my

last card on the fifth day. I'm staking everything on the fifth day!

August 21st. Freezing cold! A grey, milky dawn, you can't tell if the sun is up or not. A few snow flakes float about in the air.

I looked at the clock over the entrance—it had run ahead one more hour. The meridians are shrinking fast, we're sailing south, toward the Antarctic. I smiled to myself: Things are going my way for the time being.

I went out on the catwalk. The ocean was calmer, no longer breaking over the deck.

I made for the bow. And all of a sudden, I spotted a man hanging against the lurid southern horizon. His body swung to and fro like a pendulum from the crossbeam of the radio mast.

The catwalk was deserted. The wind swirled the snow flakes around. Syao hung by the neck, his hands tied behind him, looking much smaller than he had been. He hid the southern horizon, swinging now to the left, now to the right.

I retraced my steps to bump into 07 at the entrance. He was gay, his eyes glittered, there was a strong smell of rum on his breath.

"Did you see him?" he asked me.

I answered in a muffled voice.

"Yes."

"He hanged himself," 07 snickered.

"Must have . . ." I shrugged.

He regarded me in silence.

"Must have . . ." I repeated.

His rum breath made me feel sick. Another second and those gay, mocking little flames in his eyes would have made me lose my head! I could no longer hold out in that Schellenberg skin, the world was furiously spinning around me.

"Damn it!" I swore. "You're standing in my way!"

I shoved him aside and passed on.

The blood beat at my temples. I was no fool and I realised that Syao, too, had been my foe, a sworn enemy as dangerous as 07 himself and just as cruel. . . . And yet, I felt some sort of human law had been muddled by that gallows out there, and that man hanging by the rope.

Still, it is a murderous game we were all in. There is no denying that fact.

Smith came in. He was tipsy, grinning from ear to ear as he bragged how he and Hans had won a reward of one thousand dollars. They had caught that swine Syao red-handed, monkeying with the transmitter in the ship's radio room the night before.

"Smith . . ." I said, looking into his eyes and trying to gulp down a rising apprehension, "I guess he must have squealed a great many things to Dex before climbing up that mast!"

Smith shook his head. He had drunk too much, and he only tittered and mumbled. What confessions? That idiot Syao stayed as dumb as a fish, never breathed a word. They had questioned him in the officers' lounge, but he just sat there like a mute, maybe thinking about some samurai paradise! Who knows! Then Dex had thrown his cigarettes to Francois and told him to stub out his cigarettes on the yellow fool's neck. Francois had punched some pretty good holes for him on the Jap's neck. Then Dex ordered the two ventilators turned on because the smell of burned flesh made

him feel queasy. So Mr. Francois went on with the cigarette business while Mr. Dex drank rum straight from the bottle, shouting from time to time, "Talk, you yellow bastard, who's paying you?" or "What are you after?" Syao refused to talk. Then they strung him up there, on the mast, like a half-broiled steak! . . .

I clenched my teeth, inwardly sorry for Syao. True, he had been my enemy, but one could be sorry for an enemy when he died with dignity.

Smith wasn't as drunk as he looked.

"Smith . . ." I said, keeping a tight rein on my temper. "I can easily see you a drowned man, blue and bloated in the face, do you know that?"

"A drowned . . . man?" he whispered, the pupils of his eyes dilating. ". . . Me?"

"Yes . . . You!"

Lost in thought, he stood in the middle of the cabin. Then he took a quick step backwards and scrambled out. A miserable retreat.

I had little time to properly sift these events into their proper perspective. Suddenly the ship's siren set up a hoarse scream. I rushed out.

The world outside was as dismal as ever. Sparse snow flakes spun around and the southern horizon lay enveloped in black mists. Syao's body swung to and fro along the crossbeam of the mast . . .

There were so many people on the catwalk! Where had they all sprung from? I counted them—five, six, seven. . . . They were all in boots and wind-breakers and were wearing berets. They looked more like paratroopers than seamen.

Strangely enough, no one paid any attention to

Syao. Maybe they'd have been surprised if he hadn't been there.

Complete silence! Only the water swishing around the ship's sides.

I looked straight ahead of me as the others did. There, in front of the ship's bow, to our left, a white apparition, an iceberg, rose out of the air, out of the vortex of snow flakes, less than a quarter of a mile away from us. It was like a four-storeyed, flat-roofed building with no windows or balconies. A solitary, icy spectre.

Everybody looked on in silence and dread.

The wind chased the snow flakes around and Syao hung from the mast.

August 22nd. The day lives only for a couple of hours. The dawn is murky, then the day turns grey, disintegrating into a sooty dusk one hour after noon. It is snowing. The ocean is covered with snow packs as far as the eye can see. Here and there the snow packs merge to form ice-bound fields.

August 23rd. We're making our way between the white fields. Water can be seen only around the ship's sides, mixed with big blocks of ice.

Noon. All around is an endless white plain stretching all around and nothing more! . . . It has stopped snowing. It is very cold.

Evening. Smith came in with a bottle of rum. He was in low spirits, drinking in silence. I asked why he was so depressed. He lifted his shoulders and sighed. Then he told me that we were ice-bound, that for the past hour we'd been drifting, but thank God, the ice blocks were propelling us

toward a spot where an ice-breaker would meet us! . . .

An ice-breaker? . . .

August 24th. The catwalk and the ice fields are practically at the same level. One could jump over the iron railing and walk about on the ice. Almost.

A mountain of huge ice chunks has been looming up from the right, coming closer and closer to the ship. It is now some hundred steps away from us.

The sky is opaque and the southern horizon is in darkness.

August 25th. A terrible, snow-laden gale blew in from the south. That mountain of ice towered into sight from time to time, now some ten steps away from the ship.

The ice-bound fields shook as the ribs of the tanker contracted and creaked. Panic broke out on the catwalk. The bereted men were taking out kegs and boxes. Francois had his magnificent peaked hat on his head as he blew his whistle strutting about like a field marshal.

Noon. There was an explosion like a cannon going off. I ran out to see the ice splitting right next to the stern. The water, mingled with ice blocks, surged around. Our tanker regained her breath, the propeller picked up. Francois tried hard to widen the crack. He ordered the ship's engines to be reversed, then, standing at the wheel, manoeuvred it right and left.

The blizzard screamed and howled. It snowed heavily.

The Evening. I've had a shave, and have put on the best clothes I have. I'm getting ready for a

holiday. In two hours I'm going to stake everything.

Smith walked in bringing me a leather-bag full of food. In case of emergency! . . . I suggested he call in Hans and Albert. I've a wad of dollars in my wallet. . . . Why not play for it? Who knows what's in store for us tomorrow?

Smith brightened up. Why not? Maybe it would be easier to die if he had a packed wallet. His winnings would make a fine stack with the reward money that Dex had paid him after Syao had been captured.

I gave them some rum. I played and lost. I went on losing. At around eleven Smith and the others fell asleep. I've seen to it that this time they'll sleep longer, until tomorrow.

I took the gun out of Smith's holster, hiding it under my wind-breaker. It's my last expedition to the empty cabin where the small radio receiver is situated. If I bring this off, everything will be all right . . .

It's five to eleven. The lights are all out. I'm closing my diary . . .

Avakoum went out on deck. The howling blizzard lashed at him and the darkness shrieked, hurling frost into his face.

The catwalk was a pandemonium with men milling about. Shrill whistles were blowing. The boxes, heaped up here in the morning, were now being carried to the stern, closer to the crack between the blocks of ice where the water hissed and bubbled.

It took ten minutes to clear the entrance to the bridge. Avakoum did not need to take off his shoes

or hide. Nobody paid him any attention. They rushed about frantically in response to a succession of garbled commands.

The blizzard wailed and the ship zigzagged, fighting tooth and nail for a tiny outlet to the water.

Finally the entrance to the bridge was cleared of the boxes and Avakoum rushed up the iron steps to the captain's bridge. A man with a Tommy-gun stood guard on the landing in front of the iron door leading into Trofimov's apartment. There was still some semblance of order left on the bridge.

A number of men were in the wheel-house but no one seemed to notice him.

Avakoum walked straight into the chart room. Bending over his maps, the navigator didn't so much as look at him. As gaunt as a pole, his thin lips moved as he slid the scaled rule over the maps.

"Excuse me," Avakoum said, "Mr. Albert wants the co-ordinates."

The gaunt man looked up at him. His eyes were tired.

"The co-ordinates, please!" Avakoum repeated.

The navigator jotted something down on a slip of paper and handed it to him with his left hand.

"How many miles are we from Antarctica?" Avakoum asked.

"It depends!" The navigator rubbed his eyes, bending over his maps again. "If we stick to this course, it should be about three hundred and seven miles."

"Thanks!" Avakoum nodded.

When he was in the corridor again, he shifted Smith's gun to his left side, under his wind-breaker, and glanced at the figures the navigator had written

down. He memorised them as he leisurely walked up to the sentry posted in front of the door of the radio transmitter room.

"Give this to the radio operator!" he said, shoving the piece of paper into his hand.

The man hesitated.

"Mr. Albert's waiting for an answer!" Avakoum said stiffly.

"O.K.!" the man muttered. "You wait here!"

He opened the door but before he had managed to close it behind him, Avakoum's left hand had grabbed him by the throat. A strong blow on the left jaw sent the man slumping to the floor.

The radio operator, Hans' assistant, turned round astounded. The cords of his earphones were as taut as telegraph wires.

"Quiet!" Avakoum whispered urgently.

He took a step forward and struck. His hand moved as swiftly as lightning. The assistant's head tilted to one side as his body went limp. Avakoum grabbed him with his left hand, took the earphones off his head and let him carefully down to the floor.

Then he ran over to the door and locked it.

Every second counted. He took out the crystal of the radio transmitter and put in his own. He fastened the earphones over his ears, pressed the switch and sent out his calling signals into the ether. His heart pounded violently and his breath came in painful jerks.

The answer came immediately . . . as if his call had been expected all that time. He transmitted his message with his wet, perspiring fingers, his ears alive with the toll of a thousand bells.

"63 degrees, 30 minutes, south.

77 degrees, 15 minutes, east."

He repeated it. Then he removed the earphones and took a very deep breath.

Only ten minutes had elapsed but it had seemed an eternity.

No more bells pealed in his ears.

He rose, took out his penknife and cut the two antenna cables. He left them hanging by the short length of their rubber encasing.

He turned to leave. The men on the floor would come round before long. They would know nothing. They would be confused, and wasn't everybody aboard this ship confused at this moment?

Even 07?

The ship shuddered violently as if her hull had struck against an underwater reef.

He had to get out of here.

He unlocked the door then stepped back. 07 was standing before him. Two bereted sailors peered from behind his back.

They stood facing each other.

07 pushed past Avakoum and stepped into the room. He looked down at the two unconscious men on the floor. He turned back to face Avakoum. His eyes were blazing.

"Well, well, well, you *have* got yourself into jam, haven't you?" His lips curved in a smile which didn't reach his eyes. "I came to inform you that I have just been in touch with my people and they told me that Paul Schellenberg has been executed. He was strung up in a Warsaw jail two weeks ago!"

Avakoum didn't say anything. His heart was pounding again.

"Oh yes, it's true. They sneaked him aboard a

Polish steamer several days after we left Tangier. I was also told who you are—Zahov."

Suddenly Avakoum laughed.

"Now, tell me," 07 said slowly. "Who set up that game over the radio? You or Syao?"

Avakoum shrugged his shoulders. "Does it really matter?"

"Not really," 07 replied casually. "In fact . . ." he went on, "I had my suspicions about you the minute I laid eyes on you."

"What is done can't be undone."

Both of them stared at each other without blinking.

"Well, now you'll have to join Syao up there, at the mast," 07 purred. "Sorry about that, but I have no intention of letting you go."

Avakoum laughed again. "That's show business, I guess, but I don't think you're going to enjoy the spectacle."

His right hand was already pulling the gun from under his wind-breaker when the floor beneath him suddenly seemed to cave in. Avakoum fell as 07 shot up into the air, to the ceiling. The lights went out, there was an ear-splitting crash as if a giant powder keg had gone off.

Then a terrifying hush set in.

Avakoum squeezed himself out of the radio transmitter room. He lit his way with his flashlight. Crushed between two massive blocks of ice, the tanker was sinking fast, her stern up and tilted over at a sharp angle to the right.

He somehow managed to get to his cabin. He forced the door open with his shoulder and proceeded to drag Smith and the others out of there.

They went on sleeping. He pulled them by the feet to where a few survivors of the collision were lowering a boat into the furious black water below.

Then, having released his captives, he ran up the steps leading to the second floor. The iron door stood open. He cast a look at the lounge and the two cabins opposite—there was no one in there. Upturned chairs and books, scattered all over the place, showed in the beam of his flashlight.

"Troffimov, Nikolaevna!" he shouted but the wind and the grinding metal whipped his voice away from him.

He had the feeling that an iron hand was at his throat.

He dashed down the steps and onto the catwalk. It was snowing. He had to hold on to the railing to keep from slipping—half of the catwalk was already under water.

There was no other sound except the mad howl of the ocean. The snow fell softly.

The sailors who had been lowering the boat into the water had vanished. The ship was deserted.

He went back to his cabin to pick up his fur-lined coat. His eyes rested on the food bag and he slung it over his shoulder, collecting the bottle of rum as he walked out. When he was on the catwalk again, the water was already swishing around the bridge. The ship would go down any moment now.

He crawled on all fours, climbing what seemed like a glass mountain, up to where the ship's larboard side touched shoulders with the mass of ice. His hands closed over an oar in the dark and he managed to reach the iron railing, using the oar as a staff.

The ice-bound wilderness, plunged in impenetrable blackness, spread out at his feet. He could hear only the soft whisper of the snow flakes coming down on him.

It was a moment of bitter defeat.

With his arms flung round the iron railing, he wondered if it was any use jumping over. 07 had probably rowed away with the professor and Natalia Nikolaevna and their boat had surely been smashed by the ice blocks! What would he do, *alone* on the ice? Wait for his rescuers only to tell them: "Troffimov has disappeared . . ." They'd know Troffimov had disappeared . . . They'd know Troffimov had disappeared without his telling them . . . The wilderness and the solitude had a language of their own; they would tell them that much . . .

Suddenly the deck under his feet began to rise and the slope became so steep that he almost hung by his hands. He thought: "All is over!"

Right then, hanging as he was, he spotted a light far ahead of him, far off in the dark, down below. A yellow light! It flashed and then it flickered out. "It's too late . . ." he thought and let go of the railing.

He descended into the darkness with the hollow feeling of hopelessness and failure.

Oscar Levi said he had never expected 07 to act so stupidly; he had never expected him, being only half a day out of Capetown, to steer south, to fall for the other's radio trick and sail towards the South Pole! 07 clenched his teeth with rage and frustration. What the hell did he know? Things looked so easy in Paris! Who wouldn't have fallen for the trick? Apart from him, only two persons, Francois and Hans, had

known about the secret radio transmitter. How could he ever have suspected either one? Didn't they both work for NATO's Second Department? . . . As for Schellenberg . . . That might not have happened had he been informed on time that Zahov had disappeared from Sofia. And Syao? Was 07 to blame if the Second Department did not keep its eyes open when recruiting crews for ships with "special" assignments? Then Oscar Levi himself had wanted the co-ordinates. He had advised him to seek shelter on the ice in case of emergency. The Franklin ice-breaker was some five hundred miles away and would pick them up.

God, what a mess! What a bloody awful cock-up.

07 had anticipated the mishap but he had never expected it to hit them at such lightning speed. The ice packs drove the tanker towards an ice-bound island, but Francois kept hoping and trusting that they could break open a passage to the unfrozen water. But at about midnight an enormous ice block gutted the hull practically all along the starboard.

Stunned by the collision and by the explosion in the engine room, 07 rushed up to the second floor, and cursing in English, he pushed the professor and Natalia Nikolaevna towards the exit, then down the steps leading to the bridge's lowest deck. The panic there was hair-raising, everybody screaming and trying to get the lifeboats out of the lockers which had been almost crushed out of existence. The ship had already begun to sink on the starboard side.

07 should have ordered his men to leave off trying to extricate boats and to pile up the food supplies onto the ice. Then, after that was done, guide the crew towards the ice fields, on the left. But he pan-

icked. It seemed to him the tanker was sinking faster and faster with each second. The water might close over his head before he had managed to reach the railing of the larboard. That was why he decided to say nothing: it was now each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. As a matter of fact, he took no decision, there was no time as death was already closing in on him, its icy breath was on his face. He grabbed both Natalia and the professor by the arm and dragged them over to the larboard railing.

"Jump!" he shouted to them in English.

Without waiting for them to jump he pushed them over the railing and, without looking back, followed them. He helped them to their feet and again dragged them on. He knew that when a big vessel sank it engulfed everybody and everything, pulling them down into her vortex. And he did not know whether the very ice they stood on would not give under their feet at any moment.

They plodded on for some hundred metres. He'd have gone on had not the professor wrenched his hand free from 07's and, unbuttoning his coat, gasped out that he couldn't take another step. Natalia slumped down at the professor's feet, threw her arms round his legs and burst into tears.

07 took out a pack of cigarettes, struck a match and lit one.

Avakoum saw the little flame, thinking it was afar as it flickered through the dense blanket of snow. Then all went black. When he came to himself he heard the waves breaking a few metres from his feet. The ship had disappeared as if she had never been, as if everything had been a nightmare.

He looked at his watch—it was two a.m. Weakened by the fall and numb with cold, he clambered to his feet and inched along on the ice, in the dark, in the driving snow. The snow flakes seared his face like tiny burning flames.

He just walked on, with no sense of direction whatever. He remembered the leather food bag. He didn't have it. He did not remember when and how he had lost it. It was a bitter blow. And while he was thinking about the bag, he realised he had been clenching the oar in his numb left hand. He had clung to the piece of wood without knowing it.

He trudged on for about an hour.

He was now looking for a place to stop, for some sort of shelter, if only a metre high, so as to escape from the swirling snow. He flashed his torchlight left and right and ahead of him. Suddenly he started. A little to the left, the ring of a woman's voice suddenly broke the stillness, some fifty metres away from him.

"Hey! . . . Hey! . . ."

Without waiting to wonder if his imagination was playing tricks on him, Avakoum dashed headlong in the direction of the voice. He ran on but had the feeling he was crawling. Only when he had caught up with them, did he become aware of the oar in his hand. He threw the oar aside and turned to Troffimov who lay on the soft snow.

"Troffimov!" Avakoum shouted as he knelt down and put his arm round the professor's shoulders. "Troffimov! What's the matter? Answer me!"

He scooped up a handful of snow and began to massage Troffimov's neck and hands rapidly and vigorously.

The professor sat up, waving his right hand.

"I don't understand . . ." he said. His voice was hollow and feeble. "The man is speaking in Bulgarian and Vadim Sergeev in English! What does it all mean?"

"We all spoke in our native languages," Avakoum said in Russian. Then in a few words he explained to him who, in fact, Vadim Sergeev was, how he had deceived them with the radio transmissions, and how he, Avakoum, had managed to get into the ship in Schellenberg's place, who was to have spied on the professor's tests with the Laser ray.

The professor propped himself up on his elbow.

"Is this all true . . . Vadim Sergeev?"

"Yes." 07's voice cracked like a whip in the darkness.

The professor spat in his direction and turned his head away. Then something happened that Avakoum had not expected. Natalia Nikolaevna put her head on his shoulder and wept softly, stricken with grief and cold.

"Natalia . . ." 07 said, and Avakoum could detect the leer in his voice. "You somehow trust men too easily! That's not advisable!"

"Be quiet," Natalia Nikolaevna moaned through her tears.

07 made no reply. When the "Franklin" ice-breaker arrived he would have all the time in the world to talk with her as he would like and the way he pleased. In the meantime he'd better not touch Zahov—he had nothing at hand with which to defend himself. Even the little dagger he had bought in Istanbul had been abandoned on the ship! . . . If

only the ice-breaker came! Avakoum alive would be some catch!

Avakoum took off his fur-lined coat and covered the professor's shoulders who had on only a sailor's sleeveless sheepskin coat over his sweater. Then he said that if they didn't move on they would freeze. He was aware that he was regaining some of his strength. That was good. He needed all the strength he could muster.

The professor sighed.

"I'd rather die on this island than be taken alive on his ice-breaker!"

"Me, too!" Natalia Nikolaevna whispered.

"Pull yourself together," Avakoum commanded, an edge of steel to his voice.

He caught the professor by the arm and led them on. Suddenly he stopped.

"Natalia Nikolaevna, would you take care of my oar!"

They walked on for some time. Then the professor said he was dizzy and had no more strength left. He had begun to cough frequently and painfully as if he were short of air. His body hung heavier and heavier on Avakoum's arm.

"Trofimov, let me carry you," Avakoum offered.

He bent over and Natalia Nikolaevna helped the professor up on Avakoum's back.

They wandered on blindly in the dark, Avakoum and the professor at the head, Natalia Nikolaevna following them with 07 bringing up the rear. Their throats contracted with the icy air, their lungs taking it in as if in little lumps. They breathed with difficulty.

"Isn't it risky to let him walk behind us?" Natalia whispered.

"On the contrary!" Avakoum shook his head. "He thinks we're in his hands and he'll see to it that nothing happens to us before his ice-breaker comes along . . ."

The morning found them weak with fatigue and cold. A grey, milky morning, with masses of burning soft snow ceaselessly falling about them. It had become difficult to walk as the snow was now almost knee high.

Avakoum made the professor take a few sips of rum from the bottle he had hidden in the pocket of his fur-lined coat. He offered a drink to Natalia but she refused.

"Let's save it for the professor!" she said almost inaudibly.

O7 stood with his back to them, he did not wish to look at the bottle of rum. He felt tired and sleepy.

"We must make a shelter," Avakoum said. It was imperative if they weren't to freeze to death.

He wrapped the professor in the fur-lined coat and turned up the collar, urging him to be patient, they would come through this in the end with flying colours. Troffimov nodded despondently and sadly.

Avakoum ripped the thick lining out of his wind-breaker, tore it into four pieces and bound Natalia's hands and his own with them. Then he started to make an igloo with blocks of ice. Natalia helped him. Three walls soon rose merging into one vault-like roof. An entrance one could easily crawl through.

O7 lifted his shoulders. He didn't move.

"Aren't you going to help us?" Avakoum flew out at him.

07 lifted his shoulders. He didn't move.

The igloo was a welcome refuge. Inside there was room for three, even four. Curled up like a cocoon, the professor coughed and coughed.

The day was coming into its own.

Avakoum went out to have a look around. 07 had dug himself a small pit in the snow and was now trying to cover it up.

The snowfall was no longer so thick. It kept snowing but now one could see farther through the swirling white blanket.

"Let's have a look at the island!" Avakoum offered.

07 frowned, thought it over and finally shrugged. It was all the same to him, he might as well go along, while waiting for the "Franklin".

It wasn't until they had taken a few paces away from the camp that they found they were perched almost on the edge of a narrow crevasse. At first they didn't see it, then, suddenly, Avakoum, who was walking ahead of 07, drew back.

"What's the matter?" 07 shouted.

Avakoum stood on the edge and looked down. Another step. Just one more step, and . . .

Last night, when they were floundering around in the snow, they *could* have kept on walking.

07 was standing by his side. He made an awed whistling sound through his teeth. "Some drop," he murmured.

Avakoum nodded.

The sides of the chasm were as smooth as glass. Avakoum inched forward and peered over. He couldn't see the bottom. About one hundred metres

down there was a narrow ledge of ice, that was all. The straight icy walls dipped down and were swallowed up by an inky void.

"Come on, let's get out of here," 07 urged, backing away and keeping a wary eye on Avakoum. Of course he didn't trust him, nor did Avakoum trust the Englishman.

From now on until they were picked up, they would watch each other with great wariness.

In the opposite direction, away from the crevasse, the ground sloped down towards the sea.

They walked on and after a hundred steps or so, they came upon a small cove. They now realised they were on an ice-bound island with sharp and rounded rocks rising here and there from under the greyish-blue snow cover. Shrouded in white ice packs and hidden by the falling snow, the ocean blew icily on their faces.

"It'll be child's play for the 'Franklin' to come up here!" 07 said.

"You sound very confident that it will come."

07 gave no answer.

A flock of penguins stood nearby watching them.

07 bent down, picked up a lump of frozen ice and threw it at them. He missed.

Farther along the shore a herd of seals lay on some flat, rocky ground. The animals did not even turn their heads in his direction.

It was possible, Avakoum thought, the seal's fat could be used to heat the professor's igloo. A small fire!

The thought of the small fire made him overcome his aversion. He looked around for a big sharp stone

and, finding one, he stepped toward the animals, his heart beating fast.

07 stood aside, watching.

The other seals scrambled into the water. When the one whose head he had bashed in with the stone stopped writhing, Avakoum wiped his perspiring forehead. His hand was dripping with the seal's blood.

Then he found another stone, a smooth one this time. He bent over the seal and began slowly and painfully to hack large chunks of fat off the body.

They returned to the igloo at about ten o'clock.

07 threw down his share of the burden, washed his hands with snow and crawled into his shelter. He covered his head with his fur-lined coat and fell asleep at once.

Avakoum took off his shirt and tore it into shreds. He soaked the shreds in the seal's fat and then put the mixture in a shallow hole in the middle of the igloo. He bored a narrow opening in the "roof" and brought the flame of his cigarette lighter to the improvised hearth.

The small fire caught. It smoked with a pungent smell, and stung their eyes, but it was a live fire, giving off some heat, nonetheless. They warmed up the rum and gave some to the professor. It soothed his chest and he soon went to sleep.

Avakoum roasted some of the meat.

Natalia Nikolaevna scooped up a handful of snow. She took Avakoum's frozen hands into her lap and washed them of the blood with soft little balls of snow. Then she pressed them to her bosom to warm them. Outside, the snow still drifted down.

07 woke up an hour before dusk. He walked up to the entrance of the igloo and called out:

"Got any of that meat left?"

Avakoum carefully moved aside Natalia Nikolaevna as she slept nestled up against him. He arranged a heap of bones and the seal's skin on the fire, picked up a piece of the roast meat and went out.

It was one p.m. The sun was setting somewhere behind the thick shroud of clouds. Snow flakes darted about in the air. A grey, gloomy dusk was setting over the world.

Avakoum handed 07 the roast meat.

The Englishman bit into the meat, chewing slowly. "Foul, rotten stuff," he muttered.

Then they went behind the igloo and lit cigarettes. Avakoum brought up the match to 07's cigarette.

"What you're doing is all useless!" 07 smiled coldly.

"Is it?" Avakoum said. "How?"

"Simple!" 07 said. "You've lost this second round. You've lost it hopelessly! In fact, Zahov, you've been losing out all along lately. You're on the losing side. Can't you see that?"

Avakoum fixed his eyes on 07's face. "I don't think so," he replied.

07 looked tired. Avakoum had never seen him look so tired. The Englishman turned away. "Does it matter? We have our jobs to do, that's all."

"Yes, that's right." 07 fell silent, thought hard, then he asked in a low voice.

"Did you manage to get in touch with your people?"

Avakoum nodded. "Yes. They should be here at any time now."

The snow fell softly, night was drawing on.

07 lit another cigarette and shrugged his shoulders in silence, looking ahead. The familiar longing for Chelsea where he had his apartment was beginning to fade away, vanishing into the twilight and the snow.

"I'll have to kill you, you know."

"I thought you would say that."

07 made a gesture of disgust. "It's a dirty business."

"I know."

"Well, what do you say?"

"There's nothing to say."

"I've no choice," 07 said in a muffled voice. "I need Troffimov and the girl. You—you're expendable."

Avakoum said, "I've seen to it that the world now knows Troffimov is alive, a captive and a victim of deception. Oh, yes, it has been done."

The snow went on falling and there was a dead, cold stillness all around.

"You will die a bitter man!" Avakoum said, "A bitter man!" he repeated.

07 was striking the snow with the point of his shoe as he clenched his fists in silence. His beloved Chelsea had completely vanished.

Avakoum headed for the igloo.

In the igloo Avakoum fixed the fire, adding more pieces of seal's skin to it. He sat down next to Natalia and closed his eyes.

He was calm. He felt a strange, disturbing peace. He thought of his room, his veranda, his cherry tree, and he smiled. His completed manuscript on ancient

mosaics lay on his desk. Avakoum affectionately touched it with his hand. He smiled at his old terracotta vase with the drawing of a doe eternally running away and the long, feathered arrow eternally pursuing it.

And he knew what he had to do.

He passed his hand over Natalia's hair who lay asleep next to him, bent over her frost-bitten hands and began to blow the warmth of his breath over them.

The drone of a plane came from the direction where the ship had sunk. The sound broke over the icy expanse like a mighty river swelling and bursting over its banks.

07, too, had heard the sound.

As Avakoum stepped out of the igloo, 07 leapt for his throat. Avakoum stumbled back beneath the force of the onslaught. His ankle twisted and his leg began to fold. He scrabbled with his other leg for support. 07's weight was bearing him backwards. The Englishman was strong. His fingers were like steel rods as they raked Avakoum's throat.

Avakoum fell. 07's weight pushed him deep into the snow. It covered him like a soft, woolly blanket.

They rolled in the snow, kicking it up with their feet so that it spattered all about them. Avakoum could feel the Englishman's rasping breath hot on his face.

He heard the girl scream and, in the distance, the steady drone of the aircraft's engine.

Each of them struggled for ascendancy over the other, but they were equally matched in strength. If only Avakoum could get some leeway, if there was

only a little space between their threshing bodies so that he could use his fists—even his knees. If only . . .

They were rolling away from the camp.

Natalia Nikolaevna screamed again.

Avakoum and 07 were clamped tight together. Avakoum's right hand had closed over the back of 07's neck and he tried to pull the Englishman's head away, across to one side.

They kept rolling. Snow began to fall.

It floated down in big, moist flakes.

Then, suddenly, Avakoum realised where they were heading.

The crevasse.

It was just ahead of them. Three yards, two yards. They were rolling towards the edge.

The snow was falling thicker now. It blanketed them completely from the world. Even the sound of the aircraft's engines couldn't be heard now.

All Avakoum could think of was the crevasse. How far? How many yards? Were they rolling away from it now, or still going towards it? He didn't know. He tightened his grip on the back of 07's neck, and, digging his feet through the snow, bracing them against the rocky ground so that they formed a kind of brake, he pulled with all his might.

Avakoum was lucky. This sudden brake on their wild progress must have caught 07 off balance. He grunted as Avakoum forced his head away.

07 was on his knees. Avakoum drew back his right fist and clipped him neatly on the jaw. 07 fell backwards into the snow. Shakily, Avakoum hauled himself to his feet and walked across to 07's sprawled figure.

The snow was like an impenetrable curtain all around them.

Avakoum stood above 07. He thought the Englishman was unconscious.

Suddenly, 07's feet shot up and drove hard into Avakoum's midriff. Avakoum shot backwards, hands clutching at his stomach. He teetered. Dimly, through the falling snow, he could see 07 pulling himself upright.

Avakoum was losing his balance. The snow was dragging him down.

Then there was nothing under his feet. Nothing. A void. He could feel himself beginning to fall backwards. With all his strength he threw himself forward, jack-knifing himself over the edge. The snow squelched away from beneath his chest and shoulders. His hands groped feverishly for something that would support him. He could feel himself slipping back. He was falling. Helpless. Too late. He could vaguely make out 07's shadowy figure through the drifting snow. He seemed to be coming toward him.

Did 07 remember the crevasse?

Slipping. He pressed his cheek against the snow. It seemed to sear his skin.

Just then his hand closed over a small, rocky knob. He brought his other hand across and heaved himself upwards. His legs were still hanging over the void. He could feel the snow dropping away beneath him.

He pulled himself up over the edge, swinging his legs—so heavy they felt like concrete blocks—across so that he was lying flush with the edge of the crevasse. It dropped away to his left, a mass of swirling, drifting snow.

07 was standing above him. He towered up and Avakoum had a crazy notion that he was some sort of snow giant. The snow was piled up on his shoulders and his hair looked as if had been fashioned from dollops of cake icing.

Did he see the crevasse?

Did he know it was there?

07 laughed and aimed a kick for Avakoum's head.

It was now or never. As 07 drew his foot back and was temporarily off balance, Avakoum rolled forward, away from the crevasse and, as quick as a flash, reached up and grabbed the Englishman's leg, the one that was still firm on the ground. He tugged it hard, then let go.

Carried forward by the impetus of his kick, 07 seemed to fly through the air. He screamed, a long drawn-out scream that faded as he plummeted into the snow-obscured bottomless depths. Avakoum looked over the edge, but he couldn't see anything. Visibility was only a few feet.

"Avakoum." He heard the girl's frightened voice.

He scrambled to his feet and limped hurriedly towards the source of the sound.

"Don't come any farther," he shouted. "Go back."

Then the girl was in front of him. She threw her arms about him and tried to bury her face in his chest. Her sobs were long and convulsive.

After a while she looked up. "07?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "It's too late."

The sound of the aircraft's engines seemed to blow across their faces in a flurry of snow. Avakoum placed his arm about the girl's shoulders and gently steered her back to the camp.

There was only one question now that remained to be answered.

Whose aircraft was it?

They would soon find out.

If it was the "Franklin", there would be another fight. Avakoum braced himself.

The plane made several circles, then it came lower and lower till it landed on the snow, sliding towards them. It came to a halt and the motors died down.

Avakoum and Natalia were already running towards it.

The pilot sprang out of the cockpit, stamped his feet in the snow and waved his hands.

"Come on, friends!" he cried out in Russian. "Quickly."

Everyone embraced, warmly, excitedly.

They helped the professor out of the igloo. After he stepped outside, Avakoum and Natalia were left alone for a moment in the igloo. Avakoum drew her to him and she offered him her lips. But they must hurry. Darkness was falling fast and they had to reach the base at Mirny.

Troffimov was burning with fever and could hardly walk. Avakoum again offered to carry him, but the professor shook his head. They made him as comfortable as possible in the plane.

Avakoum asked the pilot if he had seen the "Franklin".

"About a hundred miles back. I guess it should be here in an hour or two."

Natalia Nikolaevna threw her arms about him and began to weep again.

They climbed into the plane and the motors started up.

The Polar lights glimmered crimson in the depths of the inky blackness as the plane rose over the island.

The eternal ice lay shrouded in its vast silence below them. 07 was down there, somewhere in the darkness.

THE END

Avakoum Zahov

His name was whispered with dread in the spy centres of the West.

Zahov?

Who was he?

The daring exploits of Agent 07 are well known to readers in the Western countries.

BUT WHO KNOWS THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY?

How do the Communists view the renowned British agent and his anti-espionage adventures?

We find out in this exciting story by Bulgaria's best-selling author, Andrei Gulyashki, the creator of Avakoum Zahov, top agent for Department B, a gentle, perceptive, educated man of good taste and great charm who has a passion for archaeology and Mozart and who sees 07 as a sinister threat to world security.

In the final struggle between the world's greatest Secret Agents—one must lose. And the loser must pay the penalty for defeat!

AVAKOUM ZAHOV — BULGARIA'S TOP AGENT MATCHES WITS WITH HIS WESTERN COUNTERPART — THE INFAMOUS 07.

ANDREI GULYASHKI was born in Bulgarska Rakovitsa village, district of Koula, in 1914. He participated actively in the resistance movement. Took up writing in 1931. He worked as editor for the newspapers "Rabotnichesko Delo" and "Otechestven Front," the magazines "Septemvri" and "Plamuk" and is Director of the National Theatre in Sofia at present. Twice awarded Dimitrov Prize, the highest honor for works of literature and science in his country.